

A **WIZARD** SPECIAL PUBLICATION

FATHOM™

AND THE TOP GUN UNIVERSE



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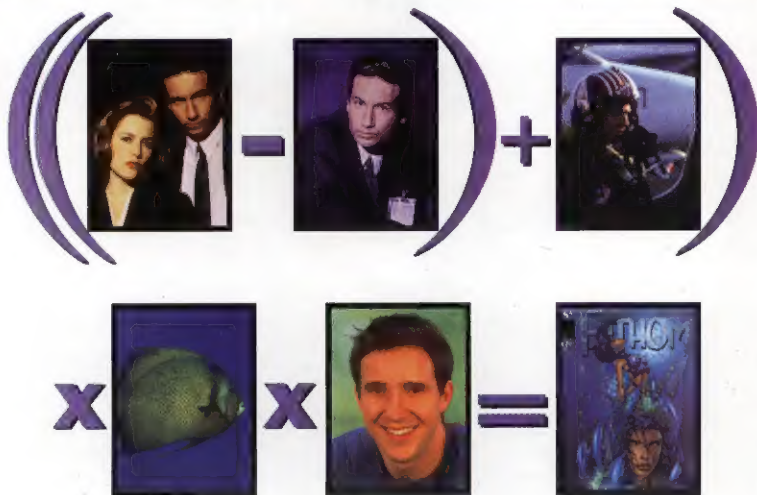
MICHAEL
TURNER
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JOE SMITH
1999



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BEATING THE ODDS

Michael Turner's *Fathom*: Keeping afloat



THE SECRET OF HIS SUCCESS *Fathom*'s exciting parts add up to a huge hit.

There's a reason most people don't try to beat the odds. It's because by definition, the odds are against you! Now, if it's not obvious to you, then you just might discover that beating the odds can get you the biggest payoff possible. Take Michael Turner for instance. The odds he's beaten was the overwhelming probability that his latest comic book idea would fail. His reward? It's a big hit.

Fathom is the story of a mysterious young adult named Aspen Matthews. Half a sexy "X-Files" and half a submerged "Top Gun," *Fathom*'s charting a course through waters that have sunk most other voyagers. If it's one thing the entertainment industry must have learned by now, it's that water stories just don't work.

Look at this track record: "The Abyss," renowned "Terminator" director James Cameron's anticipated soggy "Aliens" redo, took in only \$54 million domestically of its \$69 million cost after critics noted it was "wet, but not deep." On television, not even Steven Spielberg's Midas touch could prevent "seaQuest DSV" from sinking like a lead balloon. In comics, *Namor* was barely kept afloat earlier this decade by names like John Byrne and Jae Lee, and is now all but forgotten. The only underwater adventure I can think of that's thrived is *Aquaman*, but that guy was battlin' giant squids back when your parents were reading comics.

What Turner has done is combined an exciting, sexy, action-packed mystery involving aliens (well, they look like aliens—are they? It's a mystery!) and the military with all of his knowledge about the sea, and created something fans are drooling over. By accurately drawing the wildlife of the deep, the scenes don't look drab and dark, but are colorful and intriguing instead. By introducing underwater fighter jets and exotic alien underwater ships, the action isn't the slow and ponderous scenes of underwater combat like in "The Hunt for Red October," but fast-paced shoot-em-ups like in "Top Gun." He seems to have avoided all the troubles a comic book about the seas could encounter, and instead turned them to his advantage.

It would be funny if there were a string of copycat titles coming out soon, trying to follow in this book's success. Against big odds, most of them would fail. But who knows? One or two might hope for the surprise success of *Fathom*.

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masthead

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and the Top Cow Universe Special Edition

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EXCLUSIVE OFFER

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Hey Aspen fans! No *Fathom* collection can be complete unless you scoop up this nifty exclusive action figure, the beautiful Aspen Matthews in Metallic Marine Armor!

34 THE "IN SEARCH OF ASPEN" CONTEST

Wonderin' just what the heck all those li'l Aspens hidin' throughout this special are doin'? Well, you better find 'em all, 'cause if you do, you could have your face drawn into a future issue of *Fathom*!

WIN!
WIN!
WIN!

KING OF THE SEA

Join *Fathom* superstar Michael Turner for a tour of his underwater kingdom

Michael Turner looks like he's been dragged along the ocean floor. But he's not even wet. Yet. Sure, his hair has that matted-down, clumpy quality that makes him look like a wet dog. And he's got bags under his eyes big enough to put your groceries in. But even though he's dead tired, he still sports a smile a mile wide 'cause today, Turner's going scuba diving.

As the sun rises behind him, it's still early—six in the blessed a.m. But at Dana Point, halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego, Turner can look out over the Pacific Ocean to a setting that looks a darned sight better than he does. It's a beautiful day for January, with temperatures in the mid-70s. The ocean? Flat as a pancake, with water that light shade of blue you thought only

showed up on postcard shots.

Turner, who soared to the top as one of comics' best-known artists on Top Cow's *Witchblade*, strides down the dock with a cool confidence. He's in his element. As a double-bonus, the lanky diving fanatic rides a new wave of success these days based on his love of the sea: He's writer and artist of his new creator-owned hit, *Fathom*.

But before jumping into a brand-new, 26-foot cruiser, Turner stops and undergoes his ritual: He pops a pill. But don't worry, kiddies—it's only Dramamine, an over-the-counter sea-sickness medication.

"I know, I know, it's the most ironic thing," says Turner with just a hint of a Southern accent left over from his Tennessee childhood. "I water ski, I surf, I dive. I've been doing this stuff since I was two years old. But I still get seasick."

GETTING KELP

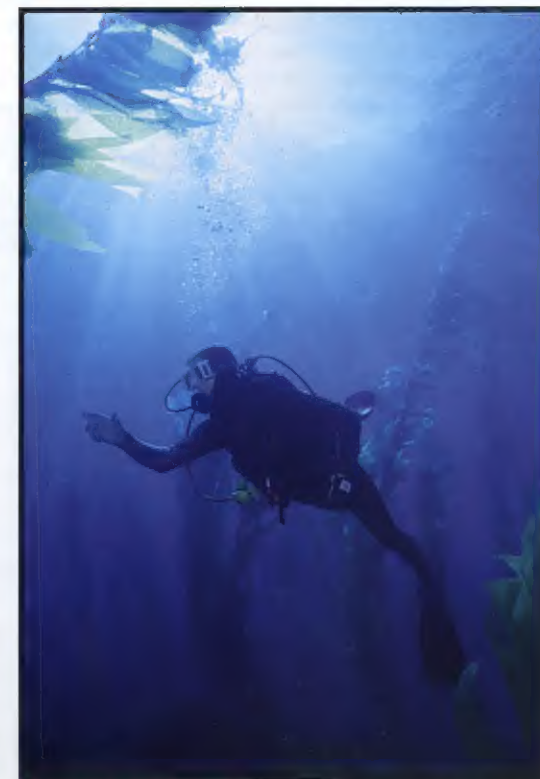
Turner hasn't slept in 31 hours. For the past two days, his reality's been a ball and chain called a drawing board, and hustling to get *Fathom* #4 back on track. December's *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* one-shot—which Turner both wrote and penciled—took a big bite out of his schedule.

But today, sailing to California's Catalina Island for a little *Fathom* research, Turner's smiling. It beats the hell out of a day in the office. And it's necessary for the sake of the book. A battle scene in issue #4 takes place in a mass of kelp. Turner's lucky: Catalina is close to home, and world-renown for having tons of the seaweed in question.

Today, Turner sails with two pros: Marty Snyderman is the photographer, an Emmy Award-winning film producer who even shot portions of the movie "Free Willy." Mark Thurlough, a technical diver who specializes in advanced salvage operations, owns and captains the boat. You've seen Mark's name in the credits of "Titanic" as the film's underwater communications advisor. Turner admires their work, especially the work they're doing today.

"These guys are the picture of 'careful,'" observes Turner. "They check and double-check everything. You've got to. There's no margin for error when you're 70 feet down and there might be sharks around."

Gauges get tested and re-tested. And o-rings—rubber gaskets that seat between the metal tanks and the breathing apparatus—are crucial. Any wear in those suckers and you risk a leak. A knife is also standard fare, but it's just used



LABOR OF LOVE A waterboy since the age of 2, Turner's turned his hobby into his life's work—creating *Fathom* out of his passion for water skiing and scuba diving.



PLAY TIME In addition to his *Fathom* research, Turner enjoys playing with schools of fish and, if he's lucky, sea horses—his personal favorites.

if you run up against a stray net or fishing line. It wouldn't do much against hostile sea life.

"It's rare," says Turner, "but if you encounter a barracuda or something, you've got to face it. Be still. If you panic and flail around, they'll perceive that you're hurt. They may try to eat you."

Fortunately, Catalina should be predator-free this time of year, so Turner can indulge a love of the water that goes back 25 years. It started out as tough love. "We grew up on a lake in Tennessee," he says. "My dad introduced me to the water one day. He just threw me in and said, 'Swim.' You learn fast like that."

Fast enough that by the time he was two years old, Turner was water skiing. By five, he could slalom—ski on one ski. By age eight, he could pull off the hardest maneuver of all: barefoot water skiing. By the time he was 14, scuba was the next plunge to take. "My stepdad then used to dive, and he'd bring back pictures he and his friends had taken in all these exotic places," recalls Turner. "I was like, 'Oh my god! I've got to do this!'"

After training for three weeks in San Diego, which included 30 hours of class-

room lectures, test dives in a pool and a final demonstration of skills out in the ocean, Turner got his certification and became a diver.

"I fell in love with it immediately," he says. "It's a different world when you're down there. And love begets knowledge. If you love something, you learn as much as you can about it."

Make no mistake: *Fathom* is a book by a man who's passionate about the subject. "Every time I'm down, I'm taking mental notes," says Turner. "Everything you see in the book is real. What you see on the page is what I see through my mask. It's always fun, and it's always work, too. But the fun still wins out—easy."

DIVER DOWN

As the crew finally shoves off, Turner takes a moment to find new readers. "Oh, by the way," he asks Snyderman and Thurlough. "Have you seen the books I do?" Turner sounds every bit the proud father as he pulls some *Fathom* issues out of a bag.

The pair like what the issues hold, especially the underwater accuracy. Snyderman even points out a dead-on similarity to a dive he did in Malaysia.

"I'd love to get out there," repents Turner.

"Closest I ever got was Tahiti. The best dive I ever went on was there—a shark dive. It was a rush, such an adrenaline pumper. Sharks are just eating machines. You can actually hear it and feel it when their jaws hit the food. You feel a tremor in the water. That's scary. But it was a great way to face your fears."

An hour's journey later, Turner and companions get to the dive site—a speck of land off the Catalina coast called Bird Island where the kelp just breaks the surface of the water. Time to suit up.

Turner strips to his underwear and pulls on a full-body wet suit that stretches from ankle to wrist. The thick rubber-foam material is designed to fit snugly to keep in body heat, and it takes Turner a good 10 minutes—and a lot of pulling and tugging—just to get into the suit. Gloves and boots go on next, followed by a hood. A 26-pound weight belt cinches around his waist.

Air tanks are harnessed to Turner's back, and a regulator—the large mouthpiece that a diver breathes through—is tested. Finally, flippers go over his boots. In all, it's about 75 pounds worth of gear, and Turner wobbles a bit with the swaying of the boat, almost falling over. But he's ready to go.

A triple-check of the gauges, some spit in the mask (you have to do that to keep it from fogging up), and Turner and Snyderman flop over the edge of the boat. They float at the surface, then use their buoyancy control to descend slowly and carefully.

"Plan your dive and dive your plan" is the rule. Both have dove here before and are familiar with the currents, but you've always got to be careful of an undertow. A strong enough one could whisk you away from the boat.

As Turner descends, the shock to his senses hits. "Things are greenish at Catalina," relays Turner. "That's the color of the algae down there. It's like looking through a green filter." And it's not just the color that gets distorted. "Because of the mask, everything gets magnified," he says. "I can hold my hand up in front of my face and it looks twice its size."

Sight only gets altered, but hearing gets twisted. "It's so quiet," says Turner. "Basically, the only thing you can hear is your own breathing, this bubbling noise. It's the oddest thing. You're never aware of your own breathing unless you're diving. But when you're down, you're so aware of it. It's the only sound in your head. You're totally alone with your thoughts."

And what about feeling? "When you're scuba diving, you have no weight. So you feel kind of like you're flying in slow motion under water," relays Turner.

There's but one problem today: the temperature. "It's freezing!" he exclaims. Up on

the boat, 70 degrees might feel nice. But below, the water is much colder. "I dive whenever I can but I prefer something a little warmer," he says. "California is good, but in January, it gets cold. I go to Cabo San Lucas down in Mexico sometimes, but Tahiti is still my favorite. You can go in a bathing suit there. It's like diving in bath water."

Cold or not, Turner's already wet, so he may as well have his fun. He takes a casual little swim through the kelp. He gets a chance to play with some fish. "If there's a school of fish, you just go with 'em," he says. "If you don't make any sudden movements, they'll let you in to school with them. They'll even brush right up against you."

Turner's also a big fan of checking out the ocean bottom and seeing what there is to find. Today's selection? Some starfish, a few sea urchins and a ton of funky-looking snails. "No one really knows just how many things live at the bottom of the ocean," he says. "But there's always something interesting down there."

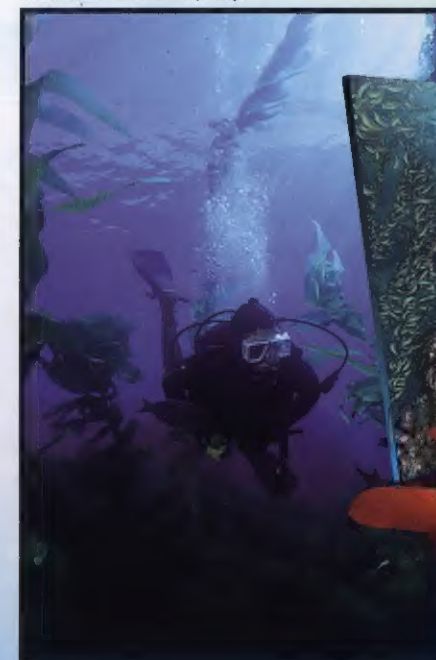
Turner also spots a few sea horses, his favorite underwater creature. No one knows just how many different varieties there are, he'll tell you. And after a mere 45 minutes under, he comes up a new man. The stresses of the last 31 hours are long gone, washed away.

WATER WORKS

"It's awesome down there today!" yells Turner as he surfaces. Visibility is about 80 feet, damn good for California. You typically get about 60 feet here, but good weather has dialed things up a notch. Turner has just seen his precious kelp beds better than ever before. The result? More work for *Fathom* colorist Jonathan D. Smith, who's still working on the kelp-filled cover to #4.

"I gotta relay this to John for specific colors as soon as we get in," says Turner excitedly. "I've got it in my head now—the actual color, the texture, everything. The way

KELP ME Turner scuba dives to ensure *Fathom's* underwater scenes are as realistic as possible, such as the kelp-bed battle scene in issue #4 (inset).



FATHOM #4

VITAL STATS

MICHAEL LAYNE TURNER



BORN: April 21, 1971 in Crossville, Tenn.

BASE OF OPERATIONS:

Marina Del Rey, Calif.

OCCUPATION:

Writer and penciler of *Fathom*, occasional designer for Sony video games

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:

Witchblade #1-#8, #10-#22, #25; *Tomb Raider/Witchblade* and *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* one-shots; *Fathom* #1-#4

THING ABOUT ASPEN THAT ONLY HE KNOWS:

"I know how she got her necklace and what it signifies. But that's part of a future story. I also know that she stays lean and trim 'cause she only snacks on Wheat Thins."

WORST WATER SPORTS MOMENT:

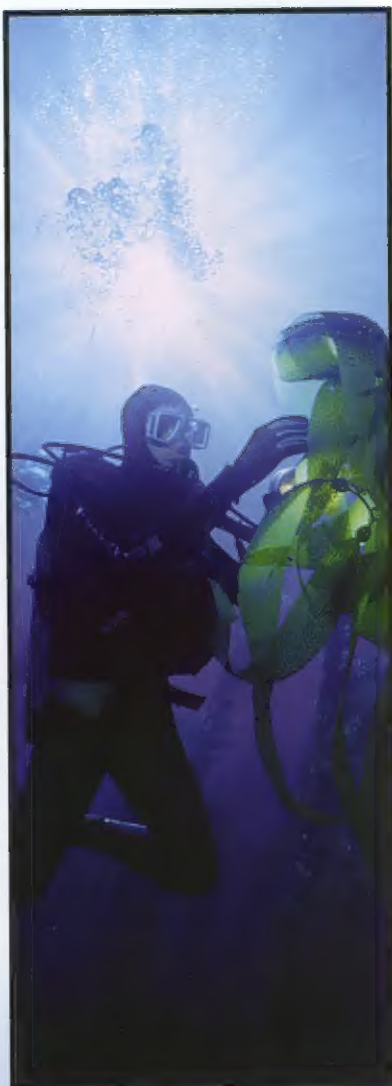
"I was paralyzed when I was 14 [after] I hit a wave at about 35 miles an hour in the middle of a barefoot water skiing move and it snapped my neck back. In an hour, I got pretty much all my feeling back. But I pulled all the muscles in my back, and had internal injuries to my spleen and stomach."

FAVORITE SEAFOOD:

"I especially love sushi. Can't get enough of it."

■ JM

"I water ski, I surf, I dive. I've been doing this stuff since I was 2 years old. But I still get seasick!" Michael Turner, on his love of the water



DIVE-TALKIN'

SCUBA DIVING TERMS FOR LANDLUBBERS

CAN'T FIGGER OUT THIS SCUBA STUFF? NEED HELP ON SOME FATHOM LINGO? OR MAYBE IT JUST TAKES AN OCEAN TO QUENCH YOUR THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE. WHATEVER THE CASE, HERE'RE A FEW DEFINITIONS TO GET YOU INTO THE SWIM OF THINGS:

ATMOSPHERE (at mə sfir, noun) a unit of pressure equal to roughly what 33 feet of sea water will apply; standard sport diving is in a range of one to four atmospheres; beyond that, it's professionals only

BENDS, THE (bends, noun) cramps that can attack a person who surfaces from scuba diving too fast; caused by de-pressurized nitrogen in the bloodstream forming bubbles; extreme cases can prove fatal; also called "pressure sickness"

BUOYANCY CONTROL (bōi ən(t) so kan trəl, noun; common use: "B.C.") the "underwater elevator"; pressure control used by divers that allows them to sink or rise while diving

FATHOM (fa thəm, noun) a measure of length equal to six feet; used in measuring the depth of water

KELP (kelp, noun) any of various large, coarse seaweeds; typically found on the Pacific coast

KNOT (nät, noun) unit used to measure speed of watercraft; one knot equals approximately 1.15 miles per hour

MIXED GASES (miks(t) gas es, noun) breathable compressed gas enriched with oxygen and containing less nitrogen than normal air; needed especially for deep diving; also called "nitrox"

NITROGEN NARCOSIS (nī trə jən nār kə səs, noun) condition that can result from prolonged diving as nitrogen in the bloodstream, when under pressure, becomes a narcotic; effect is similar to taking goofy gas at the dentist's office

SCUBA (skü ba, adjective) self-contained, underwater breathing apparatus; any gear worn by divers for breathing underwater

UNDERTOW (ən də tə, noun) a current of water below the surface flowing in a different direction from that on the surface

WEIGHT BELT (wat belt, noun) belt worn by divers to counteract air in the body and the buoyancy of the wet suit ■ JM

we had it, the kelp is only brown and green. But there are actually these kind of yellowish-blue spots. I gotta get that in."

Turner babbles nine miles a minute, relaying everything he's just seen. "The beds are huge here," he chirps. "Kelp plants are the redwoods of the ocean. They start at the bottom and sometimes, they look like they just go up forever."

And no dive would be complete without the aforementioned sea horse sighting. "This one looked like a plant," swears Turner. "It looked like it had little leaves coming off it. Perfect camouflage. I'm sitting there in the water and thinking, 'It's a plant.' But nope—living, breathing animal. It was really cool."

Turner's diving memories always remain vivid. "When I get back on dry land," he says, "in my mind's eye, I can look back down there and just remember this amazing feeling of what it's all like. I remember being a part of that world. I think I can make the reader feel a little bit of that, too."

Since the tanks only last about 50 minutes, multiple dives are needed for full research and fun. There's a lunch break in between (turkey sandwich and bag of chips bought back at Dana Point), but with each new tank, Turner gets jazzed to plunge back into his special world.

FULL COLOR After discovering that kelp have yellowish-blue spots, the accuracy-obsessed Turner can't wait to phone *Fathom* colorist Jonathan D. Smith with the new info.

"My first thought with *Fathom* was to showcase this whole world that no one's explored much," explains Turner. "Sure, there have been underwater research projects, but we still know very little about this world—there's no other way to describe it—that's right next door."

Turner finds the prolonged mystery of the oceans a bit odd. "People are exploring outer space. We're exploring all these extraterrestrial things, and we don't even know our own planet yet," he says. "Last I checked, two-thirds of the Earth was still covered by water."

After a third and final dive, the boat starts back to the mainland as Turner towels off—and goes into even more depth. "Could a non-diver do *Fathom*?" he asks, repeating a question. "Sure, someone could, if they had a certain knowledge of the water. But it would be like somebody who doesn't know how to drive doing a race car comic. I don't think you could reach the understanding necessary to get the right amount of authenticity."

And Turner puts his money where his mouth is. He's Joe Scuba. So he trusts himself to write and pencil the book. But what about his writing partner, Bill O'Neil? "The funny thing is that when Bill signed on to the project, he knew one of the prerequisites was that he'd have to pass a test," says Turner with a sly smile. "He'd have to learn how to scuba dive."

The very weekend the ink was dry on his contract, O'Neil's body got wet. "I took him to San Diego and started teaching

him how to dive," says Turner. "Fortunately, it was something he wanted to do anyway, so I didn't have to twist his arm much. It was an eye-opening experience for him. There were certain things that I got that he didn't quite get yet."

Once under, O'Neil started seeing those "things" in a different light. "Bill came up with a whole new perspective," recalls Turner. "His mind had been opened to a new point of view. I knew right then we had found the right guy for me to write the book with. He was describing everything he saw very poetically."

Turner says the main factor was comfort. "When we wrote #2, that's when Bill's input really kicked in," says Turner. "By that time, we had established these underwater races in the book. Bill could get in their heads. He knew how they would see things, how they would hear things underwater. He felt it, and that added to the authenticity."

GOOD TIDE-INGS

A huge hunk of land called "California" zooms closer as the boat speeds on into the setting sun, the sky awash with reddish oranges and even hints of purple reminiscent of the *Fathom* #0 cover. Turner starts going down, too, as two days worth of sleep deprivation finally catches up. His eyes are more than just baggy now—they're downright sleepy, and the pillow and crawl space at the front of the boat are looking more inviting by the second.

Few places can get as suddenly cold as an ocean can. When the sun drops, the water temperature drops with it. There's no land to help retain heat. Turner, who's dried himself off as best he can, sits huddled under the driest towel left on the boat. But he wants to get in the last of his dive talk before he nods off. He's still going on about the shark dive.

"Tahiti is insane!" he exclaims. "You get about 200 feet of visibility

there." And he's planning his next underwater step. "One thing that I want to do that I haven't done yet is a night dive," he says, looking for opinions from his new diving buddies. "I hear the colors are completely different."

The pair recommend Turner give it a shot. They know he can handle it. Because he understands it.

"Most people are scared of what's down there, just because they fear what they don't know," says Turner. "Well, I write about it. To do that, you have to be able to describe it. You have to understand it. And you sure can't fear it." Bringing that understanding and dispelling fear is part of Turner's plan. "I don't have to change you into a diver," he says, "but I want to bring people some knowledge—show them what's right in front of them, sometimes only 70 feet away."

The rest of his plan? Keeping his lifestyle up for a nice, long while. "No, I probably won't turn into one of those old guys living on a boat," he says. "Because dammit, I still get seasick. So that wouldn't be the best thing in the world. But I'll definitely still be water skiing, surfing and scuba diving as long as I can. And as far as comic books go, I don't see myself moving from that anytime soon."

He probably won't move at all. California is rather to his liking. "Lots of ocean, baby!" he concludes. "I could never live [somewhere like] Kansas. Not enough coastline for me."

Human submarine Jim McLaughlin can hold his breath for 15 minutes, unless you tickle him in that special spot.

IN SCHOOL Beyond entertaining, Turner hopes *Fathom* will help readers put aside their fears, and educate them about the vast world that lies beneath the waves.

MOTHERLY ADVICE

MEET FATHOM'S CO-CREATOR: MICHAEL'S MOM



Michael Turner's no mama's boy. But when it came time to develop his latest series, *Fathom*, he turned to his mother and best friend, Grace Crick, to help him through the birthing pains.

Heading to Palm Springs, the duo enjoyed three days of intense brainstorming. Nothing got in their way, not even golf. They shot two holes, then were back in the hotel room working on the book. And when they later tried to hit the hotel bar, they were back to the sketchbooks after just one drink. By the end of the weekend, they'd hammered out Aspen Matthews' look and backstory, but both are too modest to admit exactly who came up with what.

"He'd come up with something and I'd add to it," says Crick. "Or I'd come up with an idea and he'd tack on to it. We'd just get so excited, we wound up working 20-hour days."

Grace's involvement didn't end there, either. The former Miss Mississippi, a talented sculptress who regularly gets anywhere from \$3,000 to \$30,000 for her pieces, is currently working on a *Fathom* sculpture that'll be made into a statue available through comic stores.

So how's that working relationship coming along? Well enough, according to Crick.

"He's a pretty good kid," says Crick. "We're best friends. I've only had to jerk his chain a couple of times."

■ JM



TOTAL ACCESS

Fathom creator Michael Turner unlocks the door to his office to show you around

Look at a person's work space, and you'll see little bits of that person all around. Okay, not literally. We're not gonna tell you that the Top Cow office of former *Witchblade* and current *Fathom* creator Michael Turner is littered with teeny pieces of his spleen. But look around, and you'll see what's important to him: Hints of *Witchblade*-wielder Sara Pezzini and *Fathom* star Aspen Matthews are everywhere. Every time Turner pulls into port, he's surrounded by the familiar—in his case, gifts up the wazoo, booze, drugs, and one cow-with-no-name. "I like all my stuff," he says. "It makes for a fun environment, and it's nowhere near as sordid as you're making it out to be." Guess you'll just have to judge for yourself as you read on.

Jim McLauchlin couldn't photograph Michael's secret lingerie closet, since it's only for his "special" friends.

STRIKE A POSE Yep, Turner's got a Moore Creations *Witchblade* statue. But it ain't the ordinary variety. "It's one of the prototypes with a sterling-silver *Witchblade*," he reveals, "with real gems set in it."

ROBBER BARON Top Cow workers are Monopoly freaks. "Everybody in the office plays," says Turner. "I'm real good, almost undefeated." His secret? "Be a hard-ass negotiator. Mortgage everything, build houses everywhere, then make your money back. And play the car—always play the car."

LOOK IT UP Reference books dominate Turner's bookshelves. "*Coral Sea* I just got as a Christmas present," he says. "I've already used it a lot. *Manhattan Dusk and Dawn* I used for all the settings when I was doing *Witchblade*. I never got out to New York, so the book was invaluable."

TRIPLE THREAT When regular Monopoly isn't enough, there's always Triopoly, a gift from Top Cow Production Manager Peter Steigerwald. "It's insane. It's Monopoly on three levels. And it's addictive," Turner admits. "My brother and I played 10 times between Christmas and New Year's."

Photos: Jeff Jacobson

GUEST STAR The one non-Turner cover on the wall? A Marc Silvestri-drawn variant to 1990's *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* crossover. "It's there for three reasons," says Turner. "It looks really cool, it kind of completes a set, and Marc is just an awesome artist."

COVER-UP Literally every cover Turner has ever done—for comics or magazines—is up on the wall. "It makes for nice decoration and I reference them to make sure I'm not doing the same design on a cover twice."

STARSTRUCK Turner has framed posters from all three "Star Wars" movies on the wall. He likes the flicks, but he's a bigger fan of the artist. "The guy who drew them, Drew Strusnet, is amazing," says Turner. "He did new posters for the 'Special Editions' and I just fell in love with them."

GAME SUSPENDED Turner is a video game fiend, but he's cutting back. "I'm on a self-reward system now," he admits. "I don't open a new game until I've completely finished an issue. *Metal Gear Solid* is next on the list."

LUNCHIE MUNCHIES A box of Wheat Thins are always near at hand. "I eat a lot of microwave dinners here at the office. I guess this is my bread group. They taste good, and they come in this convenient box."

'MOO'VING GIFT The Beanie Baby cow is a present from Top Cow Director of Marketing Kate Sherwood. Turner likes the gift, but won't name the animal. "Hey, I'm a guy here, alright?" he says. "I don't name stuffed animals."

PIGSKIN HERO Turner plays in an informal, Saturday-afternoon football league with *Fathom* inker Jason Garder and Top Cow Editor-in-Chief David Wohl. "It was supposed to be Saturday mornings, but this is California—nobody does mornings here. Still, we play from about one in the afternoon until dark."

LET THERE BE LIGHT "If I'm drawing, this light over the drawing board is on," says Turner. "The fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling make a buzzing noise that can drive you crazy. I have a hard time drawing when they're on."

FRAME JOB A framed *Witchblade* #1, Turner's first major work, hangs in the corner. "It's a reminder that things can work out," he says. "The time this came out was the most nervous time in the world for me. I just hoped people would like it, and hoped the book would succeed."

GROOVY SOUNDS "I really go in cycles in terms of what music I listen to," says Turner. "A few months ago, it was heavy metal. Now I'm on a soundtrack kick. I really like Hans Zimmer, the composer who did 'The Rock' and 'Prince of Egypt.'"

TOY BOY Turner keeps a set of *Witchblade* action figures—which he helped design—on the wall. "Moore Action Collectibles does great work," says Turner. "I'm really looking forward to the *Fathom* figures." Turner's current fave? The green Medieval *Witchblade*.

WET WORDS As Turner works on *Fathom*, the research material stays near the drawing table. "*Whales and Realms of the Sea* are two books I'm digging into now," says Turner. There's also an art book by famed "good girl" artist Olivia for anatomy reference.

360 DEGREES Circle templates are crucial for the many spheres of the Deep Marine Discovery, *Fathom*'s underwater research facility. But for big jobs? "I just use a CD," says Turner. "Look at any comic and you'll be surprised how many circles are exactly the same size. All artists use CDs."

MANGA MANIA A series of *Battle Angel Alita* books by Yukito Kishiro are Turner's only Japanese reference. "I look at lots of manga, but don't care for much of it. But this is the best! It's tremendous action stuff. Kishiro does it so well."

OUT OF PLACE One of Turner's favorite *Witchblade* pieces is "In Quiet Repose," framed as a poster here. "My dad has the original over his fireplace," says Turner. "The rest of his house is very Western—decorated with wood sculptures of elk, bears and Indians. Then he's got this babe piece. He gets lots of...comments about it."

LEGAL DRUGS Even lawyers have hearts. These gold boxes are gifts from Top Cow's legal firm. Turner knows they're filled with coffee and chocolate, but hasn't opened them yet. "I'm waiting for the next deadline binge when I really need the caffeine boost."

HIGH CLASS *Robb Report*, a magazine full of goodies for the very rich, hangs out on Turner's shelf. But he's not shopping. It was used for reference for tycoon Kenneth Irons, a *Witchblade* supporting character. "I got it for the pictures of yachts," says Turner. "I kept it for reference on motorcycles, cars, clothes, jewelry—damn near everything."

KICK ASS! "South Park's Stan is a Christmas gift from the Wizard crew. Turner's a big fan of the TV show. "I watch it all the time," he says. "It's a great learning show with multiple positive lessons for kids. Riiiiight."

MIRROR, MIRROR "If you're an artist and you don't have a mirror, then you're not an artist yet," says Turner. "It was the first thing Marc Silvestri told me to get. I use it all the time to do facial expressions, check shadow, and to see how folds in clothing look."

LEAN CUISINE Nature Valley Chocolate Granola bars are an office staple. "I eat 'em with yogurt," says Turner. "They give you good energy. When I was doing martial arts, I learned to eat healthy." The diet paid off: Turner holds a red sash in Choy Li Fut, a Chinese Kung Fu system. That means he's qualified to be an instructor.

TOOL OF THE TRADE Turner swears by a Koh-I-Noor Technigraph mechanical pencil with 2H lead. "The lead is a little harder than a standard #2 pencil, 'cause I like to press a little harder," he says. "They're available at any art store, but I'm lucky—the Cow provides us with most of this stuff."

ASPEN EXTREME

Michael Turner pushes water adventure to the boiling point in his hot new series, *Fathom*

Aspen Matthews was conceived underwater. The site of the *Fathom* star's conception? The waters off Tahiti during an underwater excursion, some 75 feet deep. Her proud parents? Scuba-diving artist Michael Turner...and the dozens of sharks that surrounded him.

"When I was down underwater with 80 or 90 sharks, I kind of got the feeling that, man, this is a complete other world," says the *Fathom* creator/penciler about his inspirational shark dive off a Club Med vacation resort. "They were feeding 'em right in front of us—pretty scary. It changed my life. It was an amazing experience that kind of started the whole thought process of wanting to do an underwater book."

Turner, who rose to superstar artist status on Top Cow's *Witchblade*, used that inspiration along with something he read in an issue of *National Geographic*—"I'm not gonna tell you what it was, because that'll give away the story"—to create *Fathom*. Top Cow's newest runaway hit is the story of the drop-dead beautiful marine biologist Aspen Matthews, whose passion in life is...well, getting wet. Surfing. Swimming. Scuba diving. You name it. If it involves water, Aspen's there.

With no memories of her life before the age of 11, Aspen clearly remembers docking in a San Diego port aboard the cruise ship *Paradise*, a ship that mysteriously went missing for almost 10 years. Now, roughly a decade later, Aspen finds herself caught in a conspiracy between the Americans, the Japanese, a bizarre and powerful underwater race and an enigmatic blue creature. If it all sounds like the perfect Hollywood script, it should. That's just what Turner had in mind.

"I wanted to go for a very cinematic, epic, worldwide-type story," says Turner. "A global encompassing-type story, with the tone, the mood, being serious [and] dramatic, with little bits of humor and little bits of fantastic elements."

And the series is anything but your typical underwater superhero comics, past or present.

"We were looking for less superheroes and 'Die, foul villain' and that sort of stuff," says co-writer Bill O'Neil, "and more of an 'X-Files' take on things—conspiracies and intelligent characters searching for answers. It's 'X-Files' underwater. [It's] more like a fast-paced action story where the issues aren't too serious, but hopefully make you think about your environment, how you live."

GETTING IN DEEP

Aspen's environment is anything but normal. On her first day on the job as a marine biologist at the Deep Marine Discovery (DMD) underwater facility in issue #1, she came face to face with an alien-looking transport vessel. The Americans and Japanese built the DMD around the ship to study it as a joint project—at least until tensions rose, resulting in the current Cold War attitude between the two nations.

Besides the transport, Aspen also met an unconscious, underwater humanoid being with a bluish tint and coral-like armor attached to most of his body. But that's not the strange part. It seems Aspen remembers him and others like him from a vision she had while scuba diving when she was 16. Before she could let it all sink in, however, a rogue torpedo was fired by a U.S. pilot named Chance, which accidentally hit the



THE WATERGIRL Whether it's swimming, surfing or scuba diving, Aspen loves the water—an affection that may prove deadly as the mysteries of *Fathom* unfold.

DMD, causing massive damage that killed many of the employees. Aspen mysteriously survived, but a whole new world now awaits her.

"She's totally in the dark—the readers know as much or more about what's going on than she does because the readers get to see the admiral, for example," says O'Neil, referring to Admiral Maylander, a high-ranking U.S. military officer who seems to know everything that's going on. "So she starts out a little confused and maybe a bit

frightened. She's facing situations that she's not equipped to deal with, that nobody would be equipped to deal with. She's almost like a child learning how to behave as an adult. And hopefully she'll be able to succeed in doing that. She's got an awful lot to learn in a really short amount of time."

But while Aspen may still be in the dark about many things, her desire to learn and to understand the water fuels her. "She's a very curious character," says Turner. "She wants to know everything about the water

because it's something she's just completely drawn to. She's a happy person, but she's not someone you're going to find giggling all the time. She's definitely serious about her job."

Despite Aspen and the readers' best efforts to solve it, however, one mystery that will be revealed slowly throughout the series is Aspen's true origins. While the first story arc—roughly nine issues—will reveal what her role in the big story is and where she came from, and the second arc will reveal

CHARACTER PROFILE ASPEN MATTHEWS



WATER ON THE BRAIN

Aspen studied at U.C. San Diego and earned a degree in marine biology. (#1)

MILK DRINKER Aspen's bones have the flexibility and structure of a 14-year-old's, even though she's really in her twenties. (#3)

BREATH ASSURE Aspen has so many alveoli in her lungs, she has roughly five times the lung capacity of an Olympic swimmer! (#3)

WATER WORKS While she doesn't know how to do so yet, Aspen is able to change her molecular structure into water and soon will be able to mold water into projectiles weapons.

HOT WATER Don't tick her off, 'cause Aspen can boil the water inside your body, or remove it altogether!

ASPEN MATTHEWS

First Appearance: *Fathom Preview Special 1998*
A water enthusiast, Aspen's life began when she wound up aboard a missing cruise ship that mysteriously reappeared 10 years after it left port. Now a marine biologist, Aspen's dream research assignment has plunged her into a host of mysteries involving the

U.S. military, an enigmatic liquid creature and a race of underwater beings, all of which may very well unlock the keys to her past—and future. Look to upcoming issues, says Turner, as some of these secrets are systematically revealed. ■ AK

where everyone else came from and what they're doing, the third arc will delve into how Aspen truly fits into the whole big puzzle. That realization may not be until some 25 or 30 issues from now, but Turner promises to give some order to the mysteries by the end of the first arc.

"You've seen the Americans, you've seen the Japanese, and you've seen that they have a sort of Cold War [relationship] going on under the waves," he says. "You've got a mysterious race sort of in between and around all of it. And then you have Aspen kind of in the middle, even though she doesn't know it. The big mysteries, the big conspiracies, the people that are conspiring with other people—she's gonna impact all of it."

Hesitant to reveal too much about the mysteries beyond that, Turner does admit there are clues hidden throughout the first few issues. When the big secret's finally revealed, he promises that fans will be able to look back and see what was in front of their eyes the whole time. It's all similar to what the artist did with his early work on *Witchblade*. For example, fans didn't realize *Witchblade* bad boy Ken Irons didn't have a right hand until roughly eight issues into the series. And despite their insistence that they saw his right hand before, upon reviewing earlier issues, fans finally noticed that the stub of the missing hand was always in his pocket.

RIDING A DIFFERENT WAVE

Fathom's not your typical superhero book. For one thing, no one's called "Fathom."

"Aspen's name isn't Fathom," says Turner. "Nobody's named Fathom. I mean, nobody in 'Star Wars' is named Star Wars. I thought 'Fathom' was a really cool title. It means a nautical depth, and it also means imagining certain things. It's basically an underwater adventure tale with lots of things you couldn't imagine."

You also won't see Aspen or any other characters putting on costumes and hunting down criminals either. The closest thing Aspen'll come to tights and a cape, besides her bathing suits of course, is that coral armor the underwater race wears. During the story, she'll be wearing pieces of coral on her body, but according to Turner, it's more like putting on armor than a costume.

"With [the underwater race's] bodies, they can completely turn the molecular

structure of their bodies into water," says Turner. "For example, if you take a stick, change your arm into water, put the stick through your arm and then come back into form, the stick's gonna be sitting in your arm. So there're gonna be definite scenes where their bodies turn into water a little bit as they graft the stuff on it and then form back into their [solid] shape."

Keeping the mystery alive, Turner won't even reveal the name of the underwater race, or call their fantastic abilities and strange technology superpowers. "If I tell you [their name], it'll give away some of the secrets," says Turner. "And most of their 'powers' necessarily just have to do with their own bodies. To be able to manipulate water, they have weapons that are built for that. Most of our [technology] is built on combustion. But being underwater, combustion doesn't exist, so they base everything on compressing water, which is something that's damn near impossible to do. But they've learned how to do it and how to harness the power."

No costumes. No true superpowers. And certainly no talking sea horses. Yep, *Fathom's* a far cry from other



ALL IN THE FAMILY? Aspen's newly manifested water powers suggest she's somehow related to the coral-armored underwater race (above), but Turner's not telling—yet.

SCIENCE FICTION

THE REAL DEAL ON FATHOM'S HIGH-TECH GOODIES

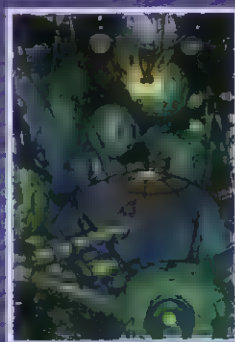
THE AMAZING OCEANIC TECHNOLOGY IN CREATOR/ARTIST MICHAEL TURNER'S *FATHOM* HELPS GIVE THE BOOK A HIGH-TECH, DRAMATIC FEEL. BUT HOW MUCH OF THIS STUFF IS SCIENCE AND HOW MUCH IS OUT-AND-OUT FICTION? LET'S TAKE A LOOK....

DMD

DEBUTED: #1

SPECS: This immense research facility was built 1,200 feet beneath the surface of the ocean. Turner chose the station's spherical shapes because that structure is least susceptible to the ocean's pressure. Although oil rig divers use pressurized habitats at that depth, the enclosures are hauled to the surface nightly. The deepest that human habitats are currently stationed today is about 100 feet.

FACT/FICTION: Fiction

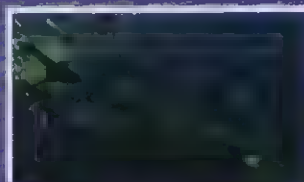


SUBMERSIBLE JET PLANE

DEBUTED: #1

SPECS: The superslick techno-vehicle that fighter jock Chance pilots flourishes in both air and water. Although Graham Hawkes at Deep Ocean Engineering, a California engineering firm that specializes in designing and building underwater craft and other gear, has designed a vehicle, Deep Flight, that looks like a rocket plane and works underwater, his invention doesn't actually fly.

FACT/FICTION: Fiction



DEEP-WATER DIVE SUITS

DEBUTED: #1

SPECS: These suits were worn by the American and Japanese scientists as they probed the mysterious underwater vehicle at the DMD. You probably won't see the *Fathom* suits' distinctive, tail-like propulsion/stabilizing device any day soon. But JIM and WASP suits are both fully functional, one-person, man-shaped submarines that can take humans into the depths.

FACT/FICTION: Fact



SEAL STEALTH GEAR

SPECS: An upcoming issue of *Fathom* will feature the U.S. Navy's underwater fighting studs, the SEALs, employing a mobile sled and a rebreather, which prevents bubbles from giving away a diver's position. Both really exist and, in fact, you can get a rebreather of your very own at your friendly neighborhood dive shop.

FACT/FICTION: Fact

■ MATTHEW E. MILLIKEN

underwater comics like DC Comics' *Aquaman* or Marvel Comics' *Sub-Mariner*.

"I don't want to disparage any of them, but most underwater properties that I've seen are very unrealistic," says Turner. "I'm not saying that this thing is dead-set in science, but it's more explained as being somewhat scientific, versus superheroes. Aspen's not going to go off after people that hunt whales. Nobody's gonna be riding on the back of turtles or sea horses, or have fins for ears. I'm trying to keep this more like a 'this could really happen'-type thing."

So just how does Turner keep it real? By reading tons of books on the ocean, submarines, aircraft carriers, the navy and so on. He also does his research. Tons of it. Besides talking to the book's letterer, Dennis Heisler, who was in the U.S. Navy, Turner and Co. spent some time chatting it up with active military men.

"We try to [walk] the fine line of believability and seriousness, and being intelligent with the scientific parts of it," says Turner. "That's why we talked to actual pilots in the navy and found out what 'call the ball' [a phrase that helps pilots land on aircraft carriers] and all that stuff means. There's a lot of cool stuff—we talked to this pilot for like an hour and a half. One of the most stressful things that a human can do, they all said, is landing on the back of an aircraft carrier."

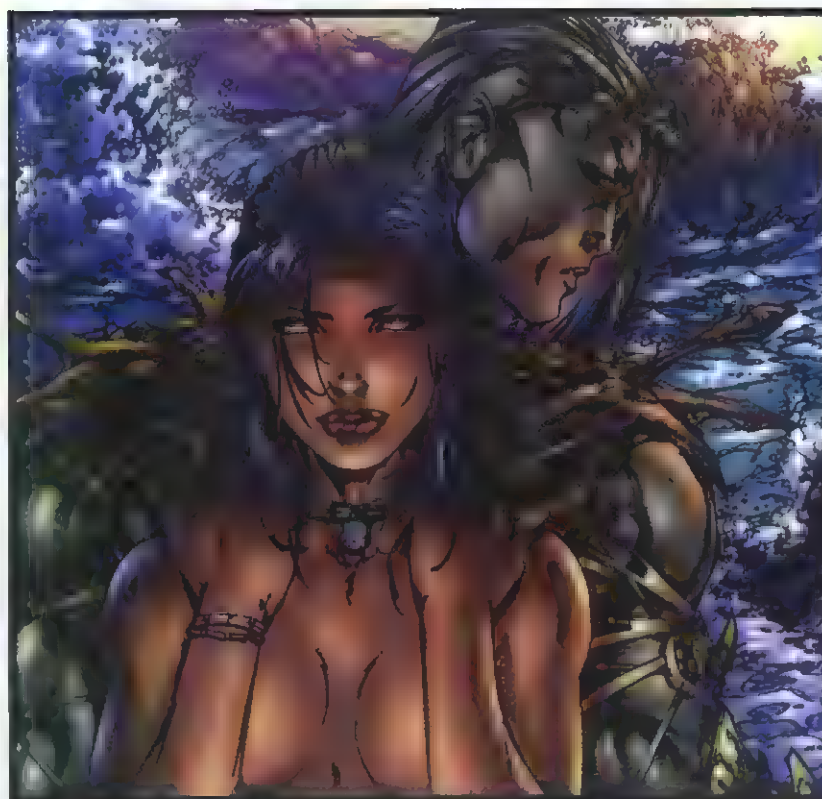
Life experience in and around the water is another plus for Turner, who's lived a very wet life. "I've been around water all my life," he says. "I grew up on a lake. I was swimming when I was two. I was water skiing when I was three. I water skied professionally for about three years and won the national barefoot championship when I was 14. I still water ski quite a bit. It's great, but oh, it hurts."

CHANGING TIDES

As for the future of *Fathom*, look for many of the title's mysteries to slowly resolve as promised. Aspen's roommate Tyler will be joining up with Chance and his brother Chris to search for Aspen, who was recently kidnapped in issue #4. Tyler's news reporting connections combined with Chris and Chance's military ties will make the three a formidable team as they uncover all sorts of secrets about Aspen and the conspiracy she finds herself a part of. And what about Aspen herself? Well, now that she's a prisoner of Killian, the leader of the underwater race, she'll be trained in the use of her own special abilities, which first manifested themselves in issue #2.

"Aspen's going to learn a lot in issue #5," reveals Turner. "A lot of the other underwater guys can control themselves as far as their own bodies with water, and they can change their molecular structure into water. She can do all of that, too. But her main thing on top of that is she can control water itself. She can create things and do lots of things with water. There're only a few other creatures—Killian is one—that can do this. She can even control the water in your body and make it boil or come out of your body. She's going to learn lots of very powerful attack-type skills. She can pull water out of the air and form certain projectiles."

Besides Aspen's powers, future issues will see what Turner will only teasingly describe as a huge catastrophic event, as well as a heating up of the U.S./Japanese Cold War and, eventually, the appearance of some rather enormous deep-sea creatures. Since it's been proven that gigantism is something that actually exists in deep, deep water, Turner promises that "there're gonna be some big underwater things that are really down deep." Killian and his underwater companions are a small example of how everything underwater is bigger—Killian's roughly 7 feet tall.



MYSTERY MAN Tall, dark and nasty, Killian has plans for Aspen, which include teaching her to use her powers in issue #5.

And that's not all. While still too coy to give away too many details, Turner has a few more hints to drop. For example, close readers of issue #4 may've noticed that Cannon Hawke—the liaison between the Americans and Japanese on the DMD—is apparently an underwater guy. But what they may've missed is that it was his transport vessel the DMD was researching all along, which explains why he was hanging around the DMD so much. And, according to Turner, he was also there when the *Paradise* disappeared.

Then there's Admiral Maylander, who seems to be holding all the cards. "He's a big, big, big part of the story," teases Turner. "He's the one guy that knows pretty much everything that's going on. He's done many, many things—more than we know. He's gonna be a very prominent part of the whole story. He's got his own agenda going on, and he's using factions from all different parts of the world to achieve this goal. But you don't really know if he really knows everything. He thinks he does."

As for Killian, the big guy's got his own agenda, which obviously somehow involves Aspen. "He's got something very, very big planned," says Turner. "It's gonna be huge. We're seeing little bits and pieces of his story planned out even from issue #1. We're gonna see bigger parts of it in #4-#6, and then it all happens in #7-#9."

Adding to the mystery is the somewhat-destroyed DMD. It will be back, but not the way fans remember it. "The DMD is still gonna play a very large part of the story," promises Turner. "What you've seen so far is gonna be very different from what you're going to see in the future. When we go back to the DMD, it'll look very different."

SURFS UP

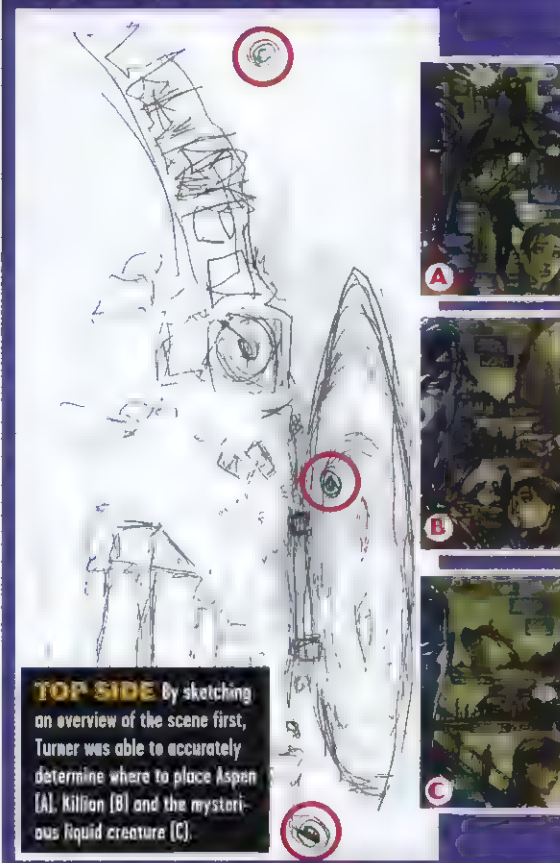
Amid all of *Fathom*'s mysteries, fans of Turner's former stomping grounds also may be wondering: What about *Witchblade*? While the artist doesn't have any plans currently to return to the book as its regular artist, he hints that his two female creations may just cross

WATER (BLUE) LINES

Some artists begin their layouts with thumbnail sketches. Others use rough storyboards. Michael Turner? Try blueprints.

For the premiere issue of *Fathom*, Turner took an interesting approach by providing not just three variant covers, but three variant stories! Three pages within each #1 contained something different. One of the alternate pages was the first page, which sees a young Aspen Matthews walking off the deck of the *Paradise*. But depending on which variant issue you're looking at, it shows you where different characters were at the time.

"I wanted to do the scene from three different perspectives," says Turner. "So I mapped it out from above. You have Aspen on the boat looking down at everything. You have Killian, who's in the water behind the boat over to the side, who's kind of watching everything. And you have the mysterious liquid creature in front of the boat." ■ AK



TOP SIDE By sketching an overview of the scene first, Turner was able to accurately determine where to place Aspen (A), Killian (B) and the mysterious liquid creature (C).

paths at some point, news that's sure to delight many readers.

"I'd like to eventually do a *Witchblade/Fathom*-type deal," confirms Turner. "I think people would like to see that, and I'd like to do it. And who knows, we might throw *Tomb Raider* into the mix again."

For now though, fans will just have to settle for seeing Aspen in her own aquatic adventures. And if Turner's enthusiasm is any indication, he'll be sticking around for awhile.

"As long as I still enjoy it," says Turner, "I don't see myself doing anything else."

Personally, Wizard Managing Editor Andrew Kardon likes dressing up in orange and green tights and riding on the backs of turtles and sea horses.



HA! I DON'T
EVEN KNOW WHAT
THE COMICS CODE
LOOKS LIKE!



SKETCHY DETAILS

Wizard plunges into Michael Turner's sketchbook to uncover how the characters of *Fathom* rose to the surface.

Michael Turner's washed up. No, the former *Witchblade* artist isn't yesterday's news. He hasn't lost his stuff. And he's certainly not throwing in the towel. What he is doing, is creating Top Cow's hottest commodity since...well, since *Witchblade*. In case your reading comprehension is less than zero or you dove into this Special without looking at the cover, here's the scoop: It's *Fathom*, and it's a runaway hit.

With only four issues out of the gate (plus a preview and #0 issue), *Fathom* has taken the comics industry by storm. It's the tale of twentysomething marine biologist/surfer babe Aspen Matthews and her love of water. It's full of weird

underwater creatures, hot babes, disappearing cruise ships, hot-shot navy pilots, mysteries, conspiracies and yep, tons of water. Chances are, if you're reading this magazine, you've heard of Aspen and probably even read some of her adventures. Thing is, you've only scratched the surface.

Want to know why Aspen looks the way she does? Or what some of the alien technology originally looked like? Well, read on. That swell Turner guy not only let us peek inside his sketchbooks, but he was nice enough to give us some insight on just what was going through his mind as he created all the characters that roam the depths of *Fathom*.

So dive in. Just don't forget to hold your breath.

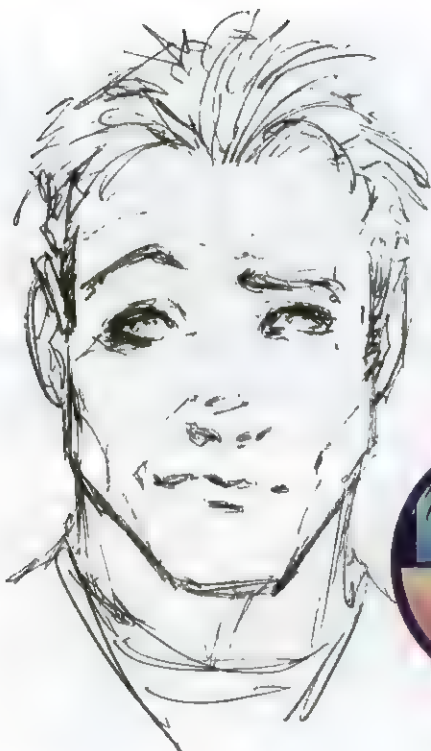
NAME: Aspen Matthews

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom* Preview

WHO IS THIS? With no memories of her life before the age of 11, Aspen's first recollections are aboard the cruise ship *Paradise*, which had mysteriously reappeared after being missing for almost 10 years. She's now caught between a number of groups—American, Japanese and underwater races—as she tries to learn about her past, while preparing for the future.

SKETCHY INFO: "I gave her more of a swimmer's-type body with stronger shoulders and a strong back, not enormous breasts. She's very athletic—more athletic versus more voluptuous. I was also trying a different hairstyle with her. I eventually ended up with her hair pulled back most of the time with the slicked-back look."



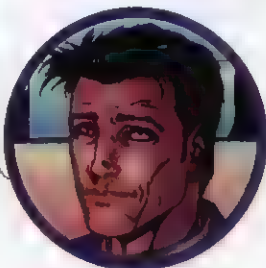


NAME: Jack Gregory

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? An ex-boyfriend of Aspen's, Jack ends up working at the Deep Marine Discovery (DMD) center with her. Cocky and arrogant, Jack unfortunately dies when the DMD is damaged by torpedo fire.

SKETCHY INFO: "He's dead, but...I'll give you a little insight on him. My mom made up this guy's name because it was an old boyfriend she used to have who was a [jerk]. So I said, 'We gotta put him in here!' So we put him in there and then we killed him."

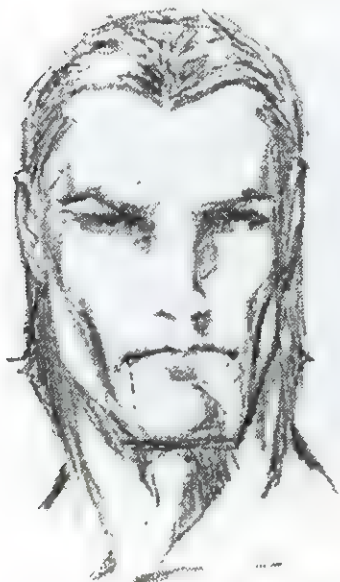
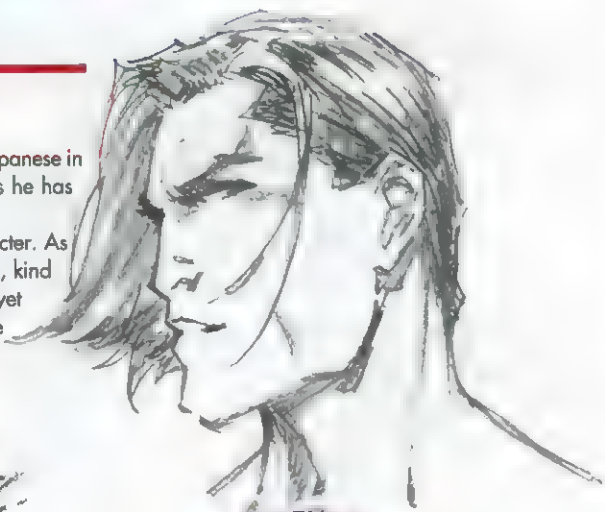


NAME: Cannon Hawke

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

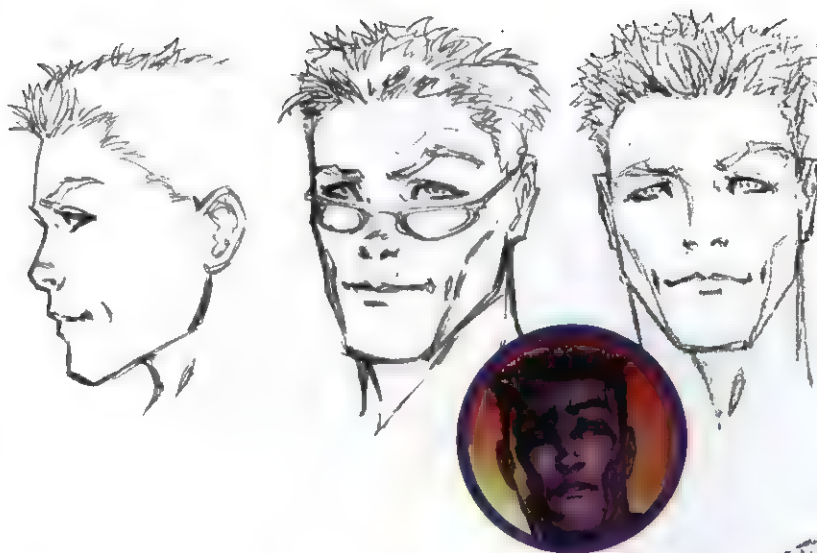
WHO IS THIS? The liaison between the Americans and Japanese in the DMD, Cannon's apparently more than he appears, as he has some ties to the underwater race.

SKETCHY INFO: "He's gonna be a big, big main character. As for his design, I was thinking a very James Bond-type look, kind of like [current Bond] Pierce Brosnan. We're not really sure yet what his missions are at this point. He was there when the *Paradise* disappeared. He was a part of that whole thing."



GET A
HAIRCUT YOU
HIPPIE!





NAME: Chance (Joker) Calloway

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? A pilot for the U.S. Navy, Chance fired a torpedo at a seemingly hostile, unidentified underwater jet, only to accidentally hit the DMD, killing nearly a hundred personnel.

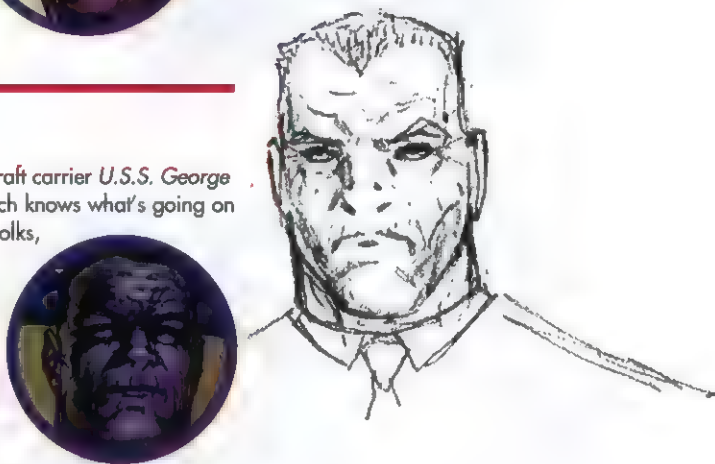
SKETCHY INFO: "With Chance, I was thinking the cocky pilot guy, kind of a combination of Maverick [Tom Cruise] and Goose [Anthony Edwards] from 'Top Gun.' He's the cocky guy, but he's also the guy who cracks all the jokes. That's why they call him Joker. I pretty much kept him exactly as what I sketched in the originals."

NAME: Admiral Maylander

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? Serving aboard the nuclear aircraft carrier U.S.S. *George Washington*, Maylander's the guy who pretty much knows what's going on between the Americans, Japanese, underwater folks, and most of all, Aspen.

SKETCHY INFO: "When I designed him, I pictured just an old guy with all the wrinkles, the guy that's really seen everything. He's been through war; he's been through sending guys to their deaths; he's been through most aspects of being in command in the military."



NAME: Killian

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? Leader of the mysterious underwater race, Killian has important plans for Aspen's future and will help train her in the use of her water-based powers.

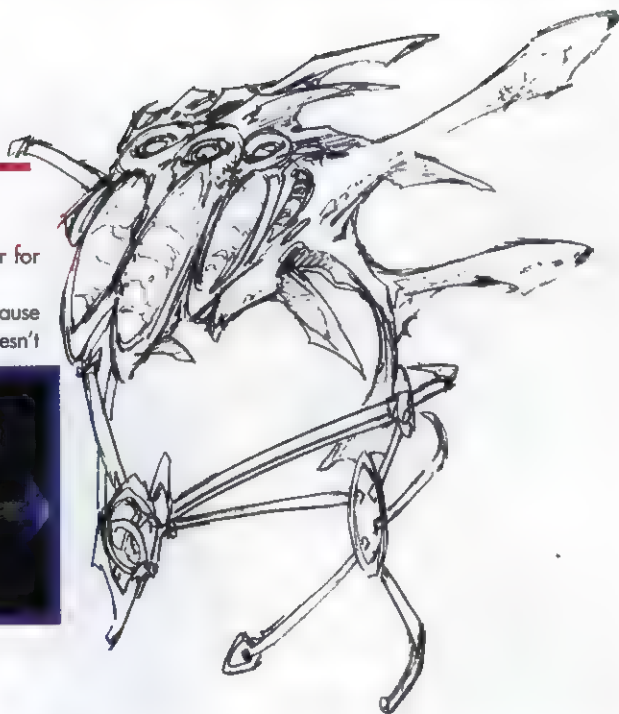
SKETCHY INFO: "I was going for an attractive-looking figure with the big shoulders, too. Again, the swimmer look, like with Aspen. I liked the long hair. I wanted to make him much more sinister looking, and I thought the stark white hair would help achieve that."

NAME: Coral Armor

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHAT IS THIS? The underwater race uses coral armor for protection, as well as for weapons.

SKETCHY INFO: "The coral armor is really interesting because coral itself is the one substance on earth that human tissue doesn't reject. They have integrated that into their bodies as protection. It's stuff they can take on and off. Even Aspen's gonna be wearing that."

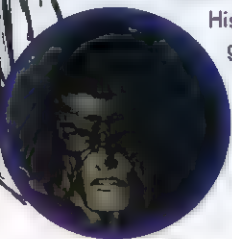
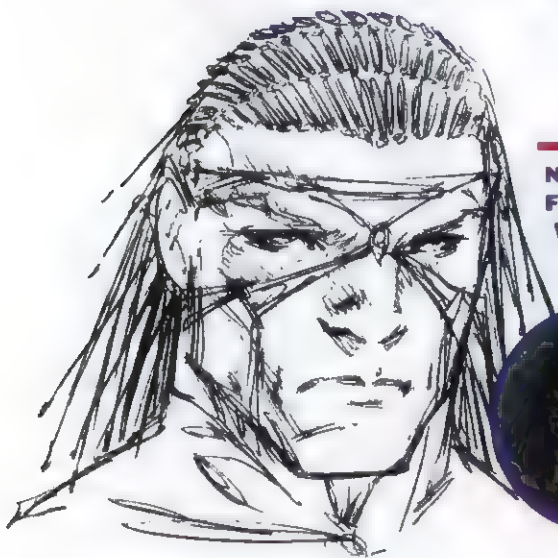


NAME: Taras

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? Part of the underwater race, Taras is Killian's right-hand man...er, alien...er, water guy...

SKETCHY INFO: "He's the one guy with the spiky hair. His working title [was] Urchin, but that [was] kinda goofy, so that's the guy we [now] call Taras. [In mythology], Taras was actually the son of Poseidon, the sea god."

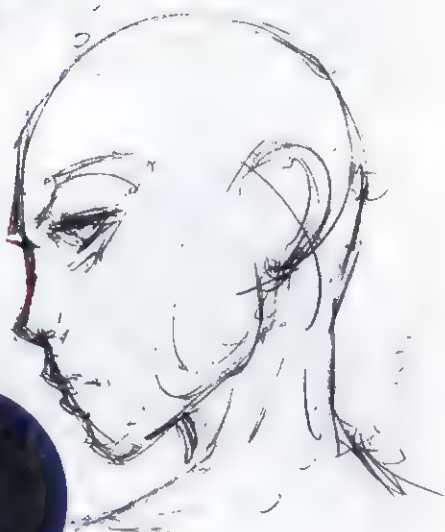


NAME: Unknown

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom #1*

WHO IS THIS? A big mystery, this blue creature seems to be looking after Aspen ever since the *Paradise* reappeared—with her on it—years ago.

SKETCHY INFO: "That's the one character I can't tell you anything about. That's the biiiig secret. His working name is 'mysterioso guy.' I can't tell you what I was thinking about when I designed him, because it gives a lot of the mystery away."





NAME: Tyler

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? Aspen's roommate, Tyler is a TV reporter who may end up nabbing the story of the century when she stumbles upon the whole underwater conspiracy.

SKETCHY INFO: "I used to date a girl who had hair like that, hair that was really long on one side. My mom came up with the name. Tyler is one of the reporter-types, like a 'Hard Copy'-type. She just wants the scoop, so she's hard-nosed, really thinking about her job first. She likes Aspen, but who knows where her actual priorities will be."

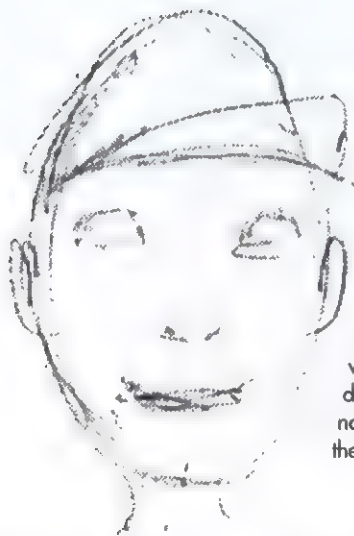
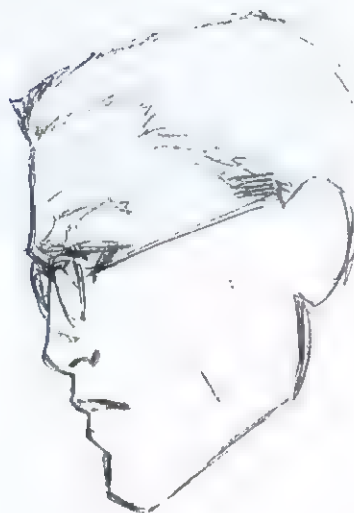
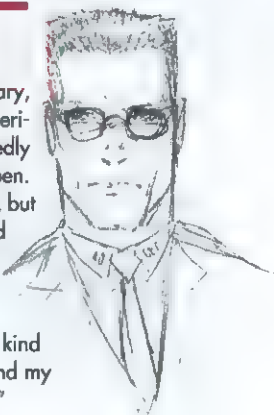


NAME: Chris Calloway

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHO IS THIS? A high-ranking member of the military, Chris is Chance's brother. Even though there's some serious conflict between the two of them, Chris unexpectedly shows up and joins Chance and Tyler in search of Aspen.

SKETCHY INFO: "He's a guy that tried to be a pilot, but couldn't because of his eyesight, so he's a little peeved about that. He's very different than his brother [Chance], but in a lot of ways, exactly the same. I kind of tried to mimic my brother and I in a lot of ways...except I don't have bad eyesight. [Laughs] Just kind of in the way that the two of us interact, except me and my brother get along a lot better than these two guys do."



NAME: Cameron

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom #3*

WHO IS THIS? A young surfer kid, Cameron has a big crush on Aspen, who he's talked to while riding the waves.

SKETCHY INFO: "I had a little role for a kid who has a crush on Aspen and witnesses certain acts but I hadn't really come up with a look. Then I met a kid at a convention. He was a little surfer guy who was sponsored by several surfboard companies. He was a really cool kid, and he hung out all three days of the show. So I put him in the book and named the character after him. He looks just like the kid I put in the book with the white bleached hair."

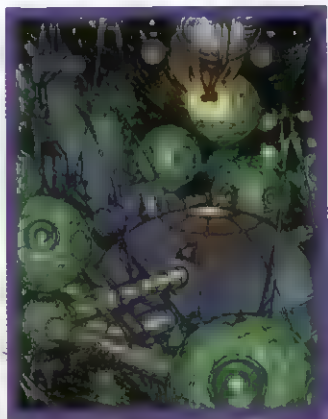
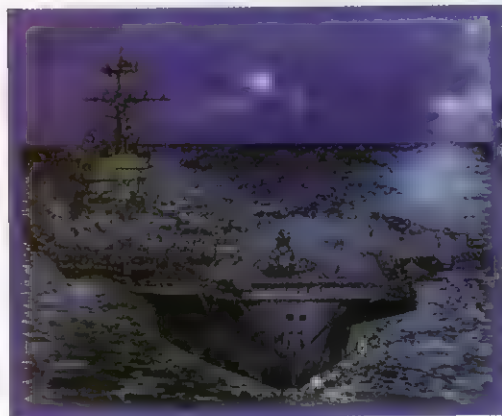


NAME: U.S.S. George Washington

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom* #1

WHAT IS THIS? A nuclear aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy, the *George Washington* houses some very interesting new aircraft:

SKETCHY INFO: "What you've seen so far is what you get. What you haven't seen, I can't tell you about yet. The amphibious craft that's flying off of it is the first hint that the carrier's not exactly normal."

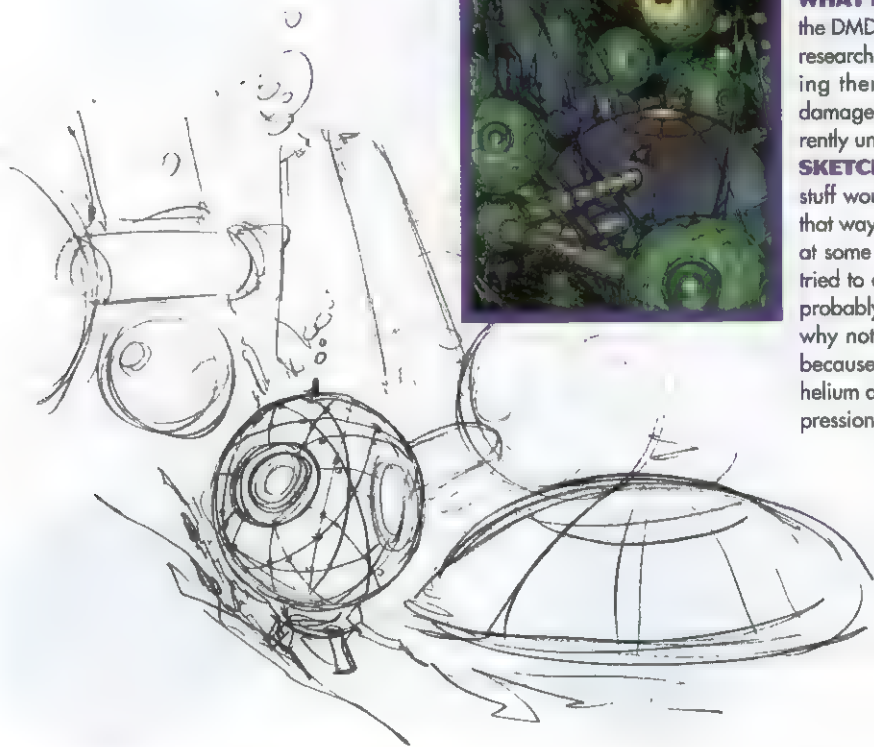


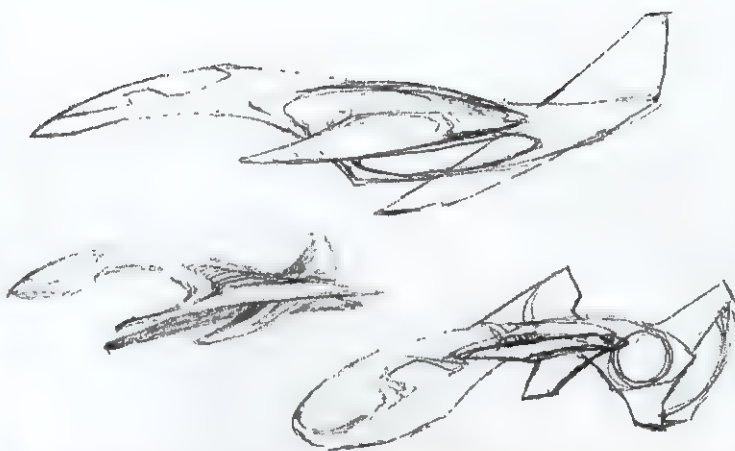
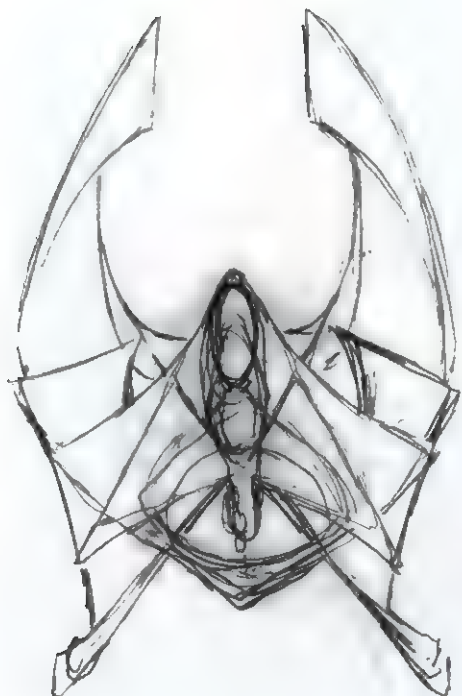
NAME: Deep Marine Discovery (DMD)

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom* Preview

WHAT IS THIS? A submerged facility, the DMD houses the latest in underwater research. Just as Aspen first started working there, the facility was seriously damaged by a rogue torpedo. It's currently under repair.

SKETCHY INFO: "I don't know if this stuff would exist, but I tried to design it that way. I looked in some ocean books at some deep-sea scientist habitats and tried to emulate part of that. Big domes probably wouldn't exist underwater, but why not? I took some artistic liberties, because they'd probably be breathing helium and there would be long decompression chambers."



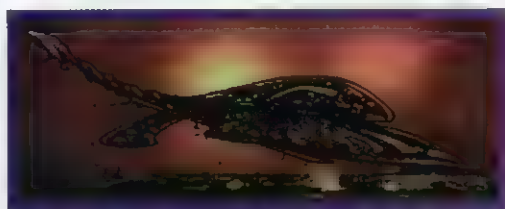


NAME: Underwater Jets

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHAT ARE THESE? There are a number of transports or jets used by the underwater race that literally "fly" while submerged.

SKETCHY INFO: "A lot of the original designs for the underwater vehicles, I didn't use. I made up most of the stuff as I was drawing it. I would be working on an issue, and I'd look back and it was like, 'Eh, that looked good six months ago.' So I made it up as I was doing it."

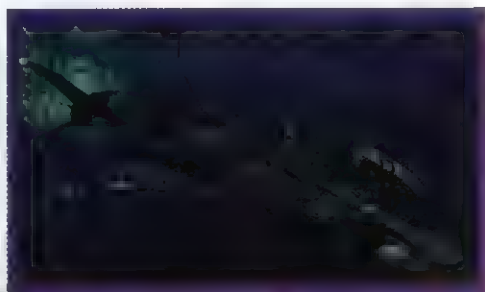
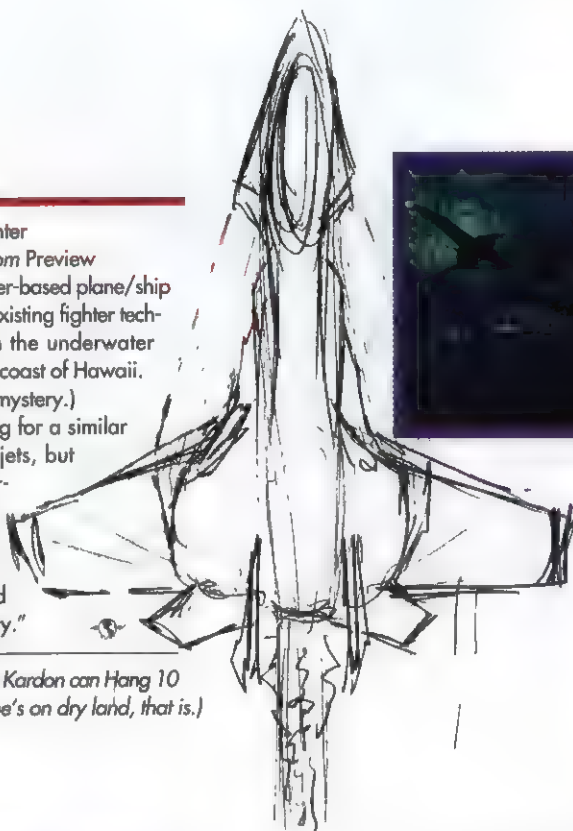


NAME: Navy Amphibious Fighter

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Fathom Preview*

WHAT IS THIS? This new carrier-based plane/ship was put together by combining existing fighter technology with ideas culled from the underwater transport that was found off the coast of Hawaii. (How they got those ideas is a mystery.)

SKETCHY INFO: "I was going for a similar look as the other underwater jets, but kind of a hybrid between a normal jet and the 'alien' jet. I was trying to imagine what the government would make. It would still look like a fighter, but it would have more advanced technology."



Wizard Managing Editor Andrew Kardon can hang 10 with the best of 'em. (Assuming he's on dry land, that is.)

LAST WOMAN STANDING

The comic battle you never thought you'd see!

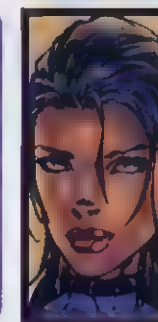
ASPEN
MATTHEWS

VS.

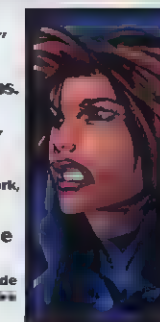
SARA
PEZZINI

THE COMBATANTS

tale of the tape



5' 8"	HEIGHT	5' 9"
120 lbs.	WEIGHT	125 lbs.
68"	REACH	69"
San Diego, CA	HOMETOWN	New York, NY
None	TAN LINES	None
Marine Biologist	OCCUPATION	Homicide Detective



With no memory of her life before age 11, Aspen Matthews first appeared on the cruise ship *Paradise* when it mysteriously docked in San Diego 10 years later. Just now discovering her true self, Aspen is learning the extent of her powers—she commands mastery over water in all its forms to the extent of turning her body itself into nothing but H₂O.

New York City Police Detective Sara Pezzini was gunned down by the mob, but saved by the ancient and powerful Witchblade. Now bonded with this sentient, mystical gauntlet, Sara uses its abilities to heal, shoot mystical force-bolts, unleash deadly tendrils and even shape-shift into nigh-impenetrable armor.

ingly defenseless opponent, Sara's tendrils slice into the ground instead of Aspen's legs as the tanned heroine quickly turns her lower body to water and back again. Refusing to be put on the defensive, Aspen pulls the moisture from the very air and thrusts it towards Sara with enough force to crush a building. The Witchblade barely has the time to shield itself against this onslaught before Sara is knocked to the ground. Aspen moves in to press the advantage, but Sara's police training keeps her alert, and she fires off a bolt of mystical energy, only to have it explode between them in a spray of super-heated water.

THE WINNER...

Before the Manhattan cop can choose her next move, Aspen launches her finishing maneuver and pulls the water just ever so slightly from Pezzini's brain. Sara's not dead, just out, and the surfer chick with the newfound superpowers stands tall.

THE HUMBLE BEGINS...

Unleashing the full fury of the Witchblade against her seem-

In a fight between two scantily clad women, the Wizard staff could care less who wins.

The "In Search of Aspen" contest



Great stuff we're giving away for a little effort on your part.

GRAND PRIZE (1): One lucky deep-sea diver will have his/her likeness drawn into a future issue of *Fathom* by Michael Turner, plus he/she will win an original sketch of his/her likeness with Aspen, a Michael Turner-signed copy of all versions of the first six issues of *Fathom* (these include all three covers of #1, #2, two covers of #3, #4, #5, #6 and the Collected Edition), the Aspen action figure, the variant Aspen action figure and a *Fathom* poster! Good Lord, what else could you want?!

First Prize (1): One aquanaut wins an original Aspen sketch by Michael Turner, a Michael Turner-signed copy of all versions of the first six issues of *Fathom* (these include all three covers of #1, #2, two covers of #3, #4, #5, #6 and the Collected Edition), the Aspen action figure, the variant Aspen action figure and a *Fathom* poster!

Second Prize (10): Ten surfers each win the first six regular issues of *Fathom* and a *Fathom* poster!

In order to get your mitts on these fabulous prizes, you have to get your mitts on the fabulous girl, Aspen, the heroine from *Fathom*. Sounds good, right? Well, get your mind out of the gutter! We mean find the images of her hidden throughout this issue. On a bunch of different pages, you'll find cute little Aspens running amok. Your job is to write down the pages on which you spotted her and send it in. We'll choose the winners from all the correct entries and torpedo over the prizes. Happy hunting!

Fill this out and put it in an envelope. Send to: The "In Search of Aspen" Contest, c/o Wizard Entertainment, P.O. Box 118, Congers, NY 10920-0118.

Deadline is June 25, 1999.

The "In Search of Aspen" Contest Entry Form

NAME _____ Date of birth _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone number (with area code) _____

E-mail address _____

I FOUND ASPEN ON THESE PAGES: _____

This contest is sponsored by Top Cow Productions, the company with the best swim team in comics!

Under the Law

No purchase necessary. Contest is open to anyone except employees of Wizard Entertainment, Top Cow Productions and their immediate families. Do not go swimming or fill out this form for at least an hour after eating. Print your name, date of birth, address, city, state, zip, e-mail address and telephone number with area code on the official entry form or a 3-by-5-inch index card and put it in an envelope. Enter as many times as you like. Mail each entry separately to: The "In Search of Aspen" Contest, c/o Wizard Entertainment, P.O. Box 118, Congers, NY 10920-0118. No mechanical reproductions of completed forms are accepted, but you can photocopy the entry form before filling it out if you don't want to mess up your magazine. All entries and all rights relating thereto become property of Wizard Entertainment and none will be returned. All taxes (federal, state and local, if any) will be the responsibility of the prize winners. Prizes are awarded in the names of the contest winners and are not transferable. Offer void where prohibited, regulated or restricted by law in a manner inconsistent with the purposes and rules hereof. **All entries must be received at contest headquarters by June 25, 1999.** Wizard Entertainment is not responsible for lost, late, misdirected, mutilated entries or entries accidentally sent to Atlantis. Winners will be selected by random drawing by Wizard Entertainment. Odds of winning will be determined by the number of valid entries received prior to the closing date of the contest. Winners will be notified no later than August 1, 1999. If an entrant, having been declared as a winner, does not accept the prize or the prize or prize notification is undeliverable, that person will be dunked in the deep end of the pool and another entry will be selected. Hope you can swim! In the event that a prize is not available or it becomes impossible for the sponsor to award the prize which has been designated, the sponsor retains the right to substitute a prize or product of equal value to the winner. Determination of whether a prize or product is of equal value is in the sole discretion of the sponsor. Winning entries will be selected on or about July 11, 1999.

For a list of winners, available after July 11, 1999, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: The "In Search of Aspen" Contest Winners List, c/o Wizard Entertainment, P.O. Box 118, Congers, NY 10920-0118.

MEDIA PLAY

Top Cow goes Hollywood with a *Witchblade* TV show, a *Fathom* movie and more

Top Cow's going Hollywood. Ever since Marc Silvestri launched the company in 1992, Silvestri and his creative partners have wanted to make the jump from comics to the big leagues of film and TV. If Top Cow's latest projects for movies, television and the Internet prove just as successful as their comics, they'll convert even bigger numbers of fans to their cause. And the key ingredient in their plans are the company's talent.

"You can't limit what creative people do," says Top Cow Entertainment President Brad Foxhoven about the company's future plans. "At Top Cow, we basically want to set up an environment where everybody can do as much creatively as they [desire]."

With a number of projects in various states of development, here's a run-down of Top Cow's current plans....

FATHOM

MEDIUM: Animated, theatrical motion picture

PRODUCED WITH: Twentieth Century Fox

TARGET DATE: Summer 2002

Fathom star Aspen Matthews may be surfing into a theater near you.

Ever since Michael Turner's hit series premiered last summer to huge sales, fan speculation has run rampant about possible TV or film projects (see "Who Floats Your Boat?" sidebar, page 38). And with interest running so high, it was only a matter of time before Hollywood took notice. In fact, to help facilitate things, Top Cow even took out a full-page ad in the film industry magazine *Variety* announcing the stunning success of *Fathom*'s first issue—and it seems to have paid off.

Since then, unconfirmed reports have revealed that Fox Feature Animation is about to announce *Fathom* as an upcoming animated feature. Fox plans on producing the film at a Japanese studio in order to provide the underwater adventure with cutting-edge animation with plentiful computer effects—avoiding the fairy-tale feel of "Anastasia," their previous animated release. Additionally, Top Cow will apparently act as a producer on the film, providing storyboards, matte paintings and character designs.

Since no official announcement has been made as of

press time, the parties involved refuse to discuss the project. Twentieth Century Fox maintains an official "no comment" policy and refuses to speculate on any projects that are in development at the studio, let alone on unconfirmed rumors.

In turn, Top Cow's Foxhoven was unable to confirm or deny the news of the deal, but hinted that there's definitely been some Hollywood interest.

"Obviously, there's some activity happening on *Fathom*," reveals Foxhoven. "It's a very popular comic book and there's been some interest in several areas in Hollywood, but we can't say anything just yet. We're close to finalizing a deal with someone and we're both excited by what that could mean for both [creator] Michael Turner and Top Cow. But otherwise, I can't say anything."

WITCHBLADE

MEDIUM: Live-action television series

PRODUCED WITH: TNT/Illusion Entertainment

TARGET DATE: Fall 1999

TV's latest superbabe is down, but not out.

Originally set to debut in the fall of 1998 on TNT, fans have been wondering what happened to the much-



SCREEN TIME After several false starts, *Witchblade*'s finally ready to blast her way onto your TV set soon.

WHO FLOATS YOUR BOAT?

WIZARD'S WORLD WIDE WEB SURFERS SPEAK OUT ON WHO THEY'D WANT TO SEE STAR IN A FATHOM LIVE-ACTION FLICK

THE NOMINEES ARE:



Jamie Renée Smith
("Field of Dreams")



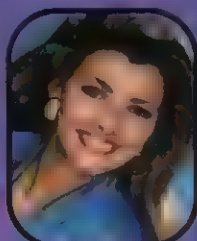
Catherine Zeta-Jones
("Mask of Zorro")



Claire Forlani
("The Hot Chick")



Ali Landry
("The Hot Chick")

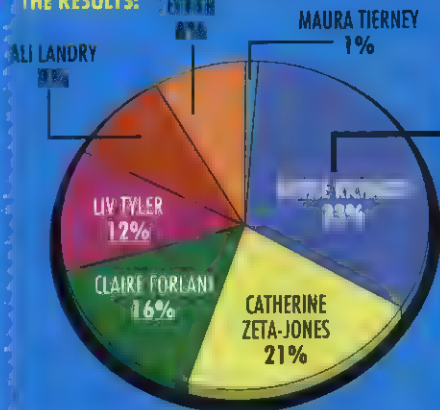


Liv Tyler
("The Hot Chick")

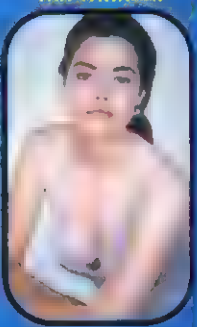


Claire Forlani
("The Hot Chick")

THE RESULTS:



THE WINNAH!



anticipated "Witchblade" series. Despite a variety of rumors, the show's still being produced with Oliver Stone's television production company, Illusion Entertainment. The reason for the delay? Trouble with the script for the two-hour pilot.

In mid-January, "Ronin" screenwriter J.D. Zeik was hired to write a new script for the pilot, which is designed to launch the series. It was felt the first script by George Giger didn't accurately capture the comic characters, and Zeik's script will supposedly emphasize the far-reaching changes the Witchblade power will have on the lives of the series' characters.

"The writer we had before wasn't working out for us," says Silvestri. "It wasn't bad stuff. It just wasn't the right flavor for *Witchblade*. Creatively, it wasn't going where we wanted it to go and we think [Zeik] is the guy who can take us there."

With Zeik's hiring, pre-production is back on track. At press time, Zeik was to have handed in his first draft by the end of February, with casting beginning "the minute the script is handed in," claims Foxhoven.

And who're the forerunners being considered for detective Sara Pezzini?

"We've tossed around some preliminary casting notes and looked through some head shots and things," says Silvestri. "What we really decided is that we'd have to wait until we had a final script. We have a couple of good ideas, but our main concern would be, 'Can she handle it?'"

Once the casting decisions are made, likely sometime in the spring, the show will begin production in Toronto, Canada.

"They're looking at setting up production immediately," says Foxhoven. "We want this out by the fall."

VIDIOTS AND FOO

MEDIUM: Internet-based, animated episodic shorts

PRODUCED WITH: Pulse Entertainment

TARGET DATE: September 1999

Top Cow's giving a whole new meaning to Web TV.

The company's debuting pilots for two new fall shows, "Vidiots" and "Foo," on www.eruptor.com, an online entertainment site where surfers can get the latest sneak peeks of upcoming movies and video games as well as watch original interactive animated and live-action programs.

"Vidiots," which features 3-D computer animation, follows the adventures of three, exiled, extraterrestrial video game characters named Uvee, Effen and Hammy, who set out to become virtual stars in our own world.

"What's really cool is that these characters are created in a 3-D world and they're almost like actors," says Foxhoven of the technology. "You just point and tell them what to do and they act it out."

A traditional 2-D show, "Foo" centers on Foo, a nineteen-year-old Asian American who, although he's



MR. SPIELBERG'S
ON THE PHONE?
TELL HIM I'M
BUSY.

PROJECT DYNAMICS Trading his art pencils for a typewriter, Top Cow CEO Marc Silvestri is busily writing the script for *The Project*, an "X-Files" meets "Mission: Impossible"-type thriller.

just a lowly intern at a hip publishing company, thinks he's cooler than the clients he's working for. "If you look at a show like 'Seinfeld' as a show about nothing," says Foxhoven, "'Foo' is a show about doing nothing and looking good doing it."

By downloading a special plug-in, viewers will be able to watch the 11-minute pilots starting this April. After that, they're scheduled to begin airing in September, with new episodes appearing every two weeks.

Foxhoven is excited about the Internet-based shows and the Internet's potential for allowing Top Cow creators free reign. "We don't have to worry about somebody's red tape limiting what we can do and how we can do it," says Foxhoven. "And it gives [our creators] a chance to do other things and flex their creative muscles."

THE PROJECT

MEDIUM: Live-action, theatrical motion picture and television series

PRODUCED WITH: Alliance Atlantis

TARGET DATE: 2000

It's the "X-Files" meets "Mission: Impossible."

That's how Silvestri describes "The Project," an original motion picture screenplay he's busy writing about a clandestine government organization that's been manufacturing the lives of two young women and a young man since their births.

"The initial idea is that these young adults find out that their parents had been experimented on during the Vietnam era," explains Silvestri. "Their offspring, which are our heroes, are genetically different than the rest of us because of these experiments. They've never known who their parents were because they were taken away from them at a very young age. Everything around them has been staged—either watched by this government agency or planted there."

Silvestri originally conceived of the idea as a TV series, but when he pitched it to Canadian film producer/distributor Alliance Atlantis, they liked the concept enough to envision it as both a movie and an ongoing series.

"We're planning the series to come right after the movie," reveals Silvestri. "Rather than sequels of the film, we'll just do the film as this elaborate theatrical pilot and then launch it as a TV series after that. Which is great because the concept itself and especially the two hours that I've writ-



ten up lends itself really well to becoming a TV series."

Once the first draft of the movie is completed, which at press time was targeted for March, Silvestri envisions there'll be a period of rewrites before development proceeds and the task of finding the right cast and crew begins.

"You really don't want to cast and do too much hiring," says Silvestri, "until you have a really good idea what your script is."

THE FUTURE

Beyond Top Cow's immediate plans, a number of possible future projects lie in wait. This summer will see the launch of "Babylon 5" creator J. Michael Straczynski's *Rising Stars* comic book series (see "Star Power," page 54), lending speculation that the series is merely a stepping stone to a new TV series. Silvestri doesn't rule out that possibility, but don't expect it right away.

"Right now, it's going to be a comic book and a great one at that," says Silvestri.

As for other projects, details remain painfully thin. Artists David Finch and Joe Benitez are working on an ultra-secret spy thriller project, and writer David Wohl has stepped in as screenwriter for an undisclosed movie project. Fans excited that the unnamed project might be Paramount's *Tomb Raider* movie can relax—it isn't. But given Top Cow's history with Lara Croft through its *Tomb Raider/Witchblade* and *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* comics, Silvestri doesn't rule out the possibility that the company might one day be called in to lend a hand.

SHE'S GOT GAME

SARA PEZZINI GETS HER OWN WITCHBLADE VIDEO GAME

Sara Pezzini's a busy woman. Not only is she a New York City Police detective, member of the powerful *Witchblade* quartet, and heroine of Top Cow's ongoing *Witchblade* comic, but she'll also soon be taking the logic to video game land. The new *Witchblade* video game, produced by Eidos Interactive, is currently scheduled for release in 2000. Based that, however, details remain sketchy.

The game is being worked on by Eidos' studio, Eidos Design, the creator of *Tomb Raider*, assures Gary Keith, spokesman for Eidos Interactive. "They're just working on the game engine, trying to create a 3-D world right now."

In the meantime, Core is working with Top Cow on developing the game. "The game marks yet another team-up between the two companies, which previously collaborated on the *Raider/Witchblade* and *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* comic book series," says Keith. "Top Cow will be providing the comic book material for the video games."

"We've been working with Top Cow Productions in a variety of ways in the past couple of years," says Keith. "We've just agreed for us to expand *Witchblade* into another medium other than comic books." ■ GREG ORLANDO

"We're not involved with it at this point," says Silvestri, "but if they gave us a call and said, 'Hey, would you like to do something with this,' we wouldn't say no."

But as Top Cow's Hollywood presence continues to increase, Silvestri promises that the company won't forget its comic book roots.

"Right now, I've been doing comics for so long, it's exciting to have an opportunity to do something different," says Silvestri. "Television or features, as breakneck and frustrating as it is—it's exhilarating. I love to be a part of that. But at the same time, we also will maintain a strong comic book presence. Those remain our roots, and as we go into these other areas we'll always be developing projects based on our comic books."

Vancouver-based freelancer Patrick Sauriol would love to play *Witchblade*, but he's afraid he's not pretty enough. He's right.

WETWORKS

Think a comic like *Fathom* just happens overnight? Think again. It takes at least a dozen steps, a little Ping-Pong and artichoke dip.

Before any issue of *Fathom* can make a splash in Your Favorite Comic Store, it's gotta go through a lotta steps. Sure, that Michael Turner guy gets his name on the cover, but without a hard-working cast to help him out, he'd be up the creek without a paddle when it comes to crankin' out a funnybook.

Every time you see a name in the credits, that name has a hand that's got to touch part of the book. Beyond that,

there's even a few behind-the-scenes players who chime in with their two-cents' worth.

Most steps happen on site at the Top Cow offices, but some might take place at a local restaurant, or even in the stately manor of colorist J.D. Smith, Esq. No matter where, they're all crucial, and usually a bit of fun. After all, it's comics. And shouldn't "fun" be the name of the game?

OUR JOURNEY BEGINS IN THE STUDIO/
OFFICE/SECRET HEADQUARTERS OF FATHOM
CREATOR **MICHAEL TURNER**...

Y'KNOW, I'VE GOT THE LIFE. I LIVE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, I'VE GOT MY OWN COMIC, CHICKS DIG ME, AND THESE KHAKI DOCKERS STAY WRINKLE-FREE WITHOUT EVEN USING AN IRON!

SUDDENLY, THE VOICE OF REASON IN THE FORM OF FATHOM CO-WRITER BILL O'NEIL BURSTS IN!

TRUE, MIKE! BUT THE REASON YOU'VE GOT THE LIFE IS THAT WE'VE GOT FATHOM TO PAY THE BILLS! AND IT'S TIME TO START THE NEW ISSUE! LET'S BLOW THIS POPSYCLE STAND!

MICHAEL TURNER CAN'T STOP SMILING! WHAT DO YOU THINK IS WRONG WITH HIM?

REMEMBER, KIDS! IF YOU KEEP MAKING FUNNY FACES, ONE DAY THEY'LL GET STUCK LIKE THAT!

TO THE BATPOLE!

YOU *DID* REMEMBER TO GREASE IT THIS TIME, RIGHT?

...DEPENDS WHAT YOU MEAN.

AND NARY A MILLISECOND LATER...

Photos © Jeff Jacobson

STEP ONE: PLOTTING. EVERY ISSUE'S PLOT STARTS AT *HOUSTON'S*, AN INCREDIBLY COOL CENTURY CITY EATERY WHERE THE ARTICHOKE DIP FLOWS FREELY. IT'S JUST BLOCKS FROM THE MIGHTY TOP COW OFFICES. MIKE ALWAYS BRINGS A SKETCHBOOK, AND BILL BRINGS A NOTEPAD.

BACK AT THE OFFICE, O'NEIL BANGS OUT WHAT HE AND TURNER HAVE PLOTTED OUT ON HIS TRUSTY LAPTOP. AT THIS POINT, THE STORY IS JUST A SKELETON-BASIC IDEAS, DIRECTION, AND A PAGE-BY-PAGE BREAKDOWN.



SHUT UP
AND WRITE
THE PLOT.

...AND WITH THIS
FLUNKY PERSPECTIVE, MY
HAND LOOKS BIGGER
THAN MY HEAD!

STEP TWO: TRAFFICKING.
O'NEIL PRINTS THE PLOT
AND HANDS IT OFF
TO FATHOM EDITOR
RENAE GEERLINGS.



GEE, AND
IT'S ONLY ONE
WEEK LATE THIS
TIME.



HEY, IT TAKES
A LONG TIME TO
GET MY SIDE-
BURNS TO LOOK
LIKE THIS.

AND RENAE BRINGS IT ON OVER TO TOP COW
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF DAVID WOHL FOR PERUSAL
AND APPROVALS AND STUFF.

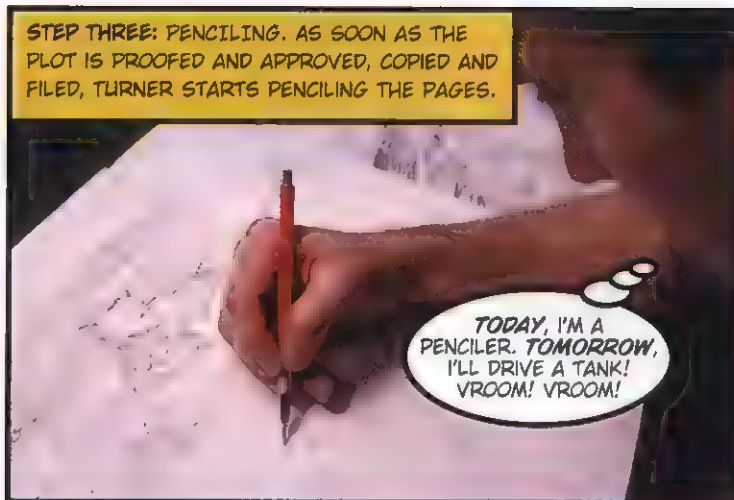


NO, NO, NO, NO,
NO! "BUXOM" IS
SPELLED WITH ONE
"B." HOW MANY TIMES
WE GONNA HAVE TO
TELL THEM THAT?

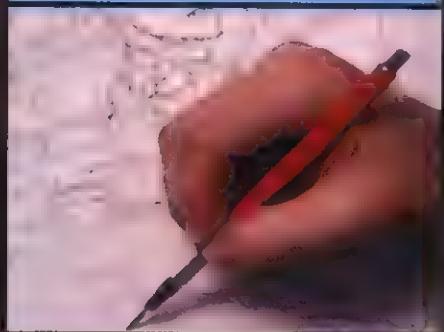


...UM, WHY
IS YOUR
FOREHEAD
GROWING?

STEP THREE: PENCILING. AS SOON AS THE PLOT IS PROOFED AND APPROVED, COPIED AND FILED, TURNER STARTS PENCILING THE PAGES.



A CLOSE-UP LOOK REVEALS THE WAY MIKE LIKES TO WORK: HE ROUGHS OUT EACH PAGE, THEN WORKS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, FULLY RENDERING AND ADDING DETAIL AS HE GOES DOWN.



STEP THREE (A): GENTLE PENCILING REMINDER. IF THINGS GET BEHIND SCHEDULE DUE TO MIKE'S...UH...BUSY SCHEDULE AND...UM...MANY DISTRACTIONS, RENAE IS THERE TO PROVIDE MOTIVATION.



STEP FOUR: RUNNING STATS. HIGH-QUALITY PHOTOCOPIES (OR "STATS," AS THEY'RE KNOWN) ARE RUN OF THE PENCILED PAGES, JUST IN CASE. SHOULD—HEAVEN FORBID—ANYTHING HAPPEN TO THE ORIGINALS, THE BOOK CAN STILL GO ON, WITH THE INKER WORKING OFF OF THE STATS.

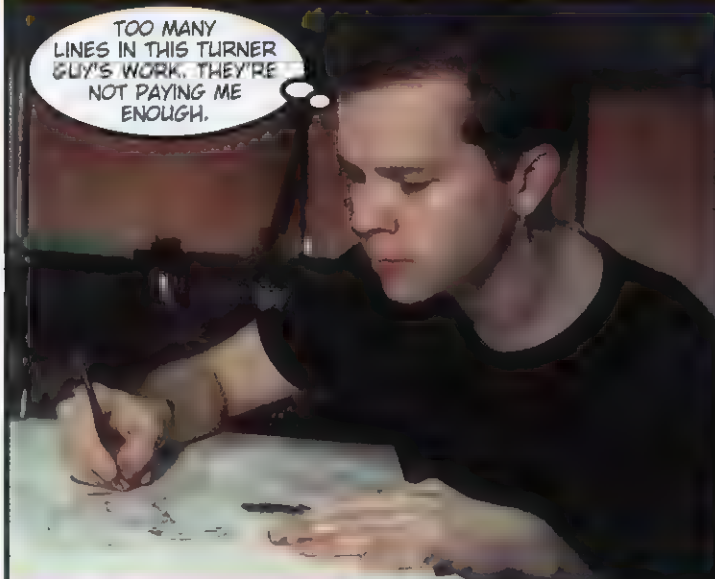


STEP FIVE: SCRIPTING. WHILE SOME PAGES ARE STILL GETTING PENCILED, TURNER AND O'NEIL HAMMER OUT A SCRIPT—EXACT CAPTIONS AND DIALOGUE—FOR THE PAGES THAT ARE ALREADY DONE. PENCILED PAGES, THE ORIGINAL PLOT AND EVEN BACK ISSUES ARE CONSULTED.



STEP SIX: INKING. PENCILED PAGES GET HANDED OFF TO INKERS JOE WEEMS V AND JASON GORDER (PICTURED HERE) FOR... UH...INKING, WE GUESS. THE PENCIL LINES ARE GONE OVER IN INK, MAKING THEM DARKER AND MAKING THEM PERMANENT.

INKERS ALSO ADD A LITTLE DETAIL OF THEIR OWN, AND LOTS OF TEXTURE. HERE, JASON GIVES A BIT OF DEPTH TO THE FUR OF MATILDA, ASPEN'S DOGGIE-NEXT-DOOR, IN *FATHOM* #4.



STEP SEVEN: LETTERING. LETTERER DENNIS HEISLER LIVES OUT OF STATE. BUT BILL O'NEIL IS A SEASONED LETTERING VETERAN AT WILDSTORM PRODUCTIONS WHO STILL LETTERS *GEN*³. BILL TAKES A PRINTED COPY OF THE SCRIPT AND USES IT TO PLACE WORD BALLOONS AND CAPTIONS ON REDUCED-SIZED COPIES OF THE PAGES FOR DENNIS.



STEP EIGHT: PING-PONG! ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES MIKE A DULL BOY. SO WHILE OTHER ASPECTS OF THE ISSUE ARE BEING WORKED ON, TURNER TAKES IN A HIGH-STAKES PING-PONG GAME...

...AGAINST *ASCENSION* WRITER AND COVER PAINTER DAVID FINCH.



FINAL SCORE: TURNER 21, FINCH 15. TURNER KEEPS HIS CAR, AND HIS DIGNITY.

STEP NINE: COLORING. COLORIST SUPREME JONATHAN D. SMITH WORKS OUT OF A HOME OFFICE. HE TWEAKS THE COLORS ON FATHOM #4'S COVER (SEE "KING OF THE SEA" IN THIS VERY ISSUE FOR ALL THE GORY DETAILS.) WITH MIKE SITTING RIGHT ALONGSIDE.



FUCHSIA! WHAT WE NEED RIGHT HERE IS A SPLASH OF FUCHSIA! IT'LL LOOK GORGEOUS, DAHLING!

UH...NO.

STEP TEN: PASTE-UP. IN THE OLD DAYS, THEY USED TO PASTE LOGOS AND CORNER BOXES RIGHT ON THE ORIGINAL ART. NOW, IT'S ALL DONE ON COMPUTER. TOP COW PRODUCTION MANAGER AND SIX-FOOT-SIX MOUNTAIN OF MAYHEM PETER STEIGERWALD DOES THE HONORS.



AND SOMETIMES, I EVEN HIDE DIRTY PICTURES IN THE BACKGROUND, TOO!

STEP ELEVEN: FILM APPROVAL. STEIGERWALD SENDS COMPUTER FILES OUT TO BE MADE INTO FILM TO PRINT THE BOOK. THINGS LIKE EDITORIAL PAGES AND PIN-UPS ARE SIMPLE. THEY GET SENT OUT FIRST, SO THEY USUALLY COME BACK FIRST. RENAE GIVES 'EM A FINAL CHECK.

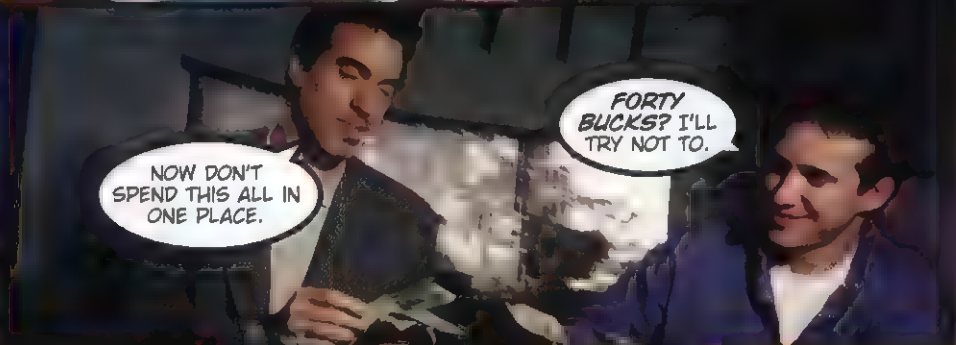


HEY, I DON'T REMEMBER A DIRTY PICTURE IN THE BACKGROUND...

...PETER!!

YEP, MINIMUM WAGE AND ALL THE PENCILS I CAN STEAL. I KNEW I SHOULD'VE GONE TO TRUCK-DRIVING SCHOOL.

AH, IT'S FINALLY PAYDAY. A HARD MONTH'S WORK DONE, TURNER GETS THE LONG GREEN FROM TOP COW CEO AND SPORTS JACKET MODEL MARC SILVESTRI.



NOW DON'T SPEND THIS ALL IN ONE PLACE.

FORTY BUCKS? I'LL TRY NOT TO.

STEP THIRTEEN: CELEBRATION! YEE-HAW! WE'RE DONE! WE'RE OUTTA HERE! WE'RE PAID! BACK TO HOUSTON'S AND A CELEBRATORY MARTINI!



AH, THE SATISFACTION OF A JOB WELL DONE! AND WE FINISHED JUST IN TIME TO START ISSUE #5 TOMORROW!

START... WHEN?

THE END!

There are 53 steps needed to assemble your very own Jim McLaughlin. Parental supervision is required.

A PERFECT UNION

Top Cow and DC's hottest properties team up for two titanic crossovers: *Darkness/Batman* and *Witchblade/JLA*

Be warned! For the first time in years, superheroes are storming Top Cow.

Ever since *Cyberforce* ended its run, there's been a lack of costumed vigilantes in the Top Cow Universe, a trend that's steered the company toward producing more fantasy-based projects rather than the standard superhero fare. But all that's about to change—at least temporarily. For the first time ever, Top Cow will join forces with DC Comics as *The Darkness* ventures down to Gotham City to encounter Batman, while Sara Pezzini and her *Witchblade* meet the JLA in two, separate, 48-page prestige format one-shots tentatively scheduled for later this summer.

"The idea was to take their top properties and our top properties and see what we could do [with them]," says DC's Dan Raspler, editor on *Witchblade/JLA*. It wasn't long before it was decided who was going to meet who. And from there, the projects pretty much became a force of their own. And cooperation? It sounds like Top Cow and DC practically invented the term.

"Top Cow's been very accommodating, allowing us to tell what we think of as very DC-type stories," says Raspler. "They're very excited about this."

So much so, in fact, that Top Cow is practically giving writer Jeph Loeb, who will pen *Darkness/Batman* with longtime friend (and current *Darkness* scribe) Scott Lobdell before tackling *Witchblade/JLA* on his own, the run of the place. In other words, says Raspler, "[Top Cow] is giving Loeb a lot of [leeway] to tell very cool stories, while keeping all the characters very much in character."

Loeb, who displayed his Batman expertise in last year's *Batman: The Long Halloween*, and Lobdell, whose early work on *Darkness* is already garnering praise, were logical choices to helm the crossovers. Additionally, both have experience writing multi-character books from their days on the X-Men titles, not to mention great story sense and a firm grasp on what the fans want to see.

Rounding out the crossovers crew is Top Cow CEO Marc Silvestri and *Ascension* co-creator David Finch, who will handle the art for *Darkness/Batman*, and Jeff Matsuda, recently of *Wolverine* fame, who'll pencil *Witchblade/JLA*.

"The creative teams are all in place now, and I couldn't be happier," says Raspler. "Then again, I don't need to be the one singing their praises. Their work speaks for itself."

DARK(NESS) KNIGHTS The new dynamic duo, Batman and Jackie Estacado, join forces courtesy of the equally dynamic writing team of *Darkness* writer Scott Lobdell and frequent Batman scribe Jeph Loeb.

THE DARKNESS AND THE KNIGHT

For both Loeb and Lobdell, the challenging part of working on the *Darkness/Batman* team-up was deciding how to keep the story relevant for both characters at book's end.

"I think people will be really surprised about the outcome of our story, particularly with what happens in *The Darkness* from that point on because of this interaction," says Loeb.

Coincidentally, Lobdell had wanted to effect a major change in *The Darkness*' central character, mob hitman Jackie Estacado, in the ongoing series. As it turns out, Jackie's meeting with Batman was the perfect opportunity to inspire it.

"Events will occur that will have a serious impact on the regular series," says Lobdell, who remembers the days when team-ups were supposed to be big deals. "Nowadays, crossovers have degraded into the standard two-page spread of every character staring each other down and then jumping into a fight."

Not so on *Darkness/Batman*. Ultimately, the story revolves around a return to basics, picking up what Lobdell and Loeb see as a vital missing link in *The Darkness*: Jenny, the only virtuous person in Jackie's life. His dearest friend from his days growing up in an orphanage, Jackie and Jenny never connected romantically, although she did admit her feelings for him shortly before she left—because she couldn't handle his violent lifestyle—in issue #6. Oblivious, Jackie never really knew what he had 'til it was gone.

"There's a line [of dialogue] that Scott found that pretty much set the tone for our story," says Loeb. "Jenny says to Jackie before she leaves, 'Try to do a little good.' Somewhere along the way, that kind of got lost. In the crossover, Jackie heads to Gotham City where he discovers that Jenny has been working in Crime Alley. The idea is that, in seeing Jenny and meeting Batman, we're going to try and tie that back up again. In fact, we're playing with using 'Try to Do a Little Good' as the title."

As a result, Lobdell hints that Jackie's persona as devil-may-care mob hitman may be changing for good. "We're going to see Jackie start to realize who he is and what he's done, and why he's done what he's done," says Lobdell. In fact, Jackie may realize that being a hitman is not what he wants.

While the change in Jackie is an essential development of the plot, at the core of *Darkness/Batman* is a crime story with a small supporting cast, comprised of each book's usual players. "We pretty much had a cast already," says Loeb. "We didn't need much after the regulars."

Basically, Jackie accompanies his uncle [and mob boss]

Don Franchetti to Gotham to muscle in on some action. At the same time, Batman's trying to solve a series of supernatural murders involving gangland figures. Eventually, the Darkness and the Dark Knight meet, something that Lobdell and Loeb acknowledge seemed destined from the start.

"Jackie and Bruce Wayne both use the dark, but for very different reasons," says Loeb. "Both inspire fear in the people they hunt. Both were orphans, yet each chose a different path. Both of them are vigilantes. They're also both ladies' men by reputation, but in reality, they don't do anything about it. [Laughs] We definitely play on that in the book."

Along that vein, don't expect constant doom and gloom in *Darkness/Batman*. Having these two characters meet makes this crossover rife with the potential for laughter. "Whenever you work with Scott

[Lobdell], what you really have are wonderful chances for humor," says Loeb. "Uncle Frankie, who thinks he can just muscle around anybody that gets in his way, is going to learn a thing or two when he runs into someone like Two-Face. We use Batman's Rogues Gallery in cameos to highlight the differences between Gotham and any other city. We don't want to imply they're main characters in the story—they're just there to bother Frankie, who takes an attitude from the very beginning of, 'I hate this city!'" [Laughs]

All kidding aside, as far as continuity is concerned, Loeb plans to steadfastly ignore the fact that these two characters are from different universes. "That's not going to be dealt with at all," promises Loeb. "The whole idea of the universes converging is kind of interesting, but these aren't universes-converging kinds of characters."

And although the crossover will have a huge effect on *The Darkness*, don't look for it to have much of an impact on the Batman books. Since working the crossover into Batman's current status quo would be problematic, the story's set in pre-"No Man's Land" continuity.

GROUP DYNAMICS

On a different note, the first-ever meeting between Sara Pezzini and the JLA presented a number of challenges, one being its overabundance of heroes. "The main problem is that Witchblade is one character, but the JLA has about fourteen!" exclaims Loeb.

After thinking it over and discussing it with Raspler, Loeb decided the best way to handle things was to focus on a smaller JLA lineup (Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, Superman and Wonder Woman), then highlight the distinctions

between their universe and Witchblade's.

"It seemed like bringing Sara into the JLA's world was the best way of doing it," says Loeb. But bringing the two properties together in a feasible manner, though, required some serious brainstorming. Luckily, Loeb realized there was a simple way to tie them together.

"We started talking about Sara and the Martian Manhunter both being detectives, and what if there was a homicide that brought these two together? The Manhunter, a telepath, could see that Sara has a terrible secret. Now, if you're investigating a murder and a cop comes from another district and seems to be hiding something, your natural tendency is to find out what's going on."

For Loeb, the incongruous image of *Witchblade*'s Sara Pezzini standing next to the Justice League was an irresistible visual, ultimately leading him to discover the story's hidden potential.

"Sara [develops] a sense of awe about the League, because that's just so not her world," says Loeb. "In the Top Cow Universe, the superhero has waned, so once you've encountered something you've never encountered before, what does that do to you? What happens to Sara and her world, which can be so engulfed by the dark, when she meets something so fantastic as the Justice League and the brightness they represent?"

Even more, what separates Sara from the more traditional examples of superheroism in the JLA is her weapon: the Witchblade, an eldritch entity that, for all its talk about punishing evil, seems to have a dark side of its own.

"The Witchblade has its own agenda," says Loeb. "It's a force that will gravitate to a more powerful being if it's in its own best interest. Here, Sara [inadvertently increases] the Witchblade's desire to find someone who's perhaps better suited for it."

Someone who's better suited to wield the Witchblade? That's happened before. And, as fans know, the gauntlet prefers its host to be female. Given that the JLA has a famous Amazon in its ranks, might we see it leap from Sara to Diana, resulting in a *Witchblade/Wonder Woman* throw-down?

"Let's just say that the JLA presents a few opportunities for other hosts," says Raspler. "There's a lot more to this story than just a big fight scene. The real interesting challenge is having the JLA go up against a device that's pretty dark and murderous to begin with."

Still, unlike Lobdell, Raspler concedes that fights in crossovers are inevitable. "In team-ups," contends Raspler, "what fans really want to see is the two characters go at each other rather than finding a way to work together—I mean, where's the fun in that?"

Even this early in the process, when the storyline's still in its fledgling stages, the creative teams are already riding a wave of enthusiasm, anxious to see

WARNING! WARNING!

THE TOP 10 THINGS WITCHBLADE AND DARKNESS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE DC UNIVERSE

10. Buy lotsa spandex. You're forbidden from DC superheroics if you're not wearing any.
9. Anyone bald in the DC Universe is evil (so keep your eyes on Martian Manhunter).
8. When around Batman, call the Darklings "Bat-Mites." He'll love it.
7. Avoid like the plague anybody referring to themselves as a "New God." Interacting with them can only hurt your sales.
6. Plastic Man is known for shape-shifting into furniture, so watch where you sit (especially if you're only wearing the Witchblade).
5. Beware of giant, one-eyed space starfish looking to conquer the Earth. No, really, we're serious.
4. Avoid the DC zoo. Gorilla Grodd, Monsieur Mallah, Titano... DC's crazy with evil monkeys!
3. If you forgot your lunch money, take Superman's. He's vulnerable to magic, so you can have your way with him.
2. Make sure *Witchblade*'s wearing a robe if she's battling alongside Green Lantern or Flash. Otherwise, they'll be useless in combat.
1. If anything weird happens or you're feeling a little gassy, just throw up your arms and blame it on "Hypertime."

■ DOUGLAS GOLDSTEIN

the book hit the shelves.

"I've always wanted to work on the Justice League," gushes *Witchblade/JLA* artist Jeff Matsuda, whose...ahem...explosive work with Loeb on *Kaboom* made him the natural choice to handle this incendiary crossover. "I can't wait. I want to see [the finished book] in my hands. I want to see it in the fans' hands!"

TAKE TWO?

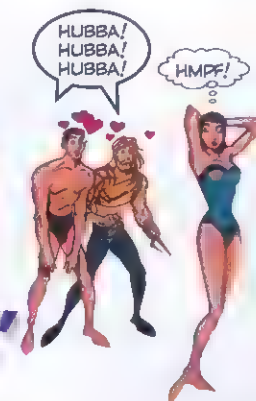
Even though Top Cow's big guns have finally visited the DC Universe, fans shouldn't despair for the future—there's still plenty of opportunity left for further team-ups, so don't be surprised if you see more in the near future. Top Cow, for one, is anxious for more. As for DC, they appear ready as well.

"We were looking at teaming up our best with Top Cow's best," says Raspler. "And I think, between the two of us, we've both still got a lot of other 'bests' to go around."

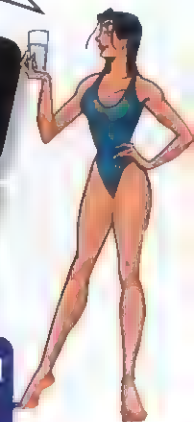
Humanitarian Scott Brick, who profiles *Witchblade* elsewhere in this issue, tries to do a little good whenever he can—for a modest fee.

"Top Cow's been very accommodating, allowing us to tell what we think of as very DC-type stories. They're very excited about this."

Dan Raspler, *Witchblade/JLA* editor



HOW DO I STAY IN
SHAPE? THIS USED
TO BE MY THIGHS.



STAR POWER

After re-energizing sci-fi TV with 'Babylon 5,' J. Michael Straczynski returns to Earth for a new challenge: one-upping *Watchmen* and *Kingdom Come*

A cow has lured "Babylon 5" creator Joseph Michael Straczynski back to Earth. After five seasons shepherding his outer space epic, he's trading in his space station and aliens for a small Midwestern town and 113 superhumans.

And the cow in question? Top Cow Comics, which is the hand-picked home for Straczynski's newest creation, a 24-issue, creator-owned maxi-series titled *Rising Stars*. Set to debut in June (which follows the special *Rising Stars* #0 preview story included with this issue), *Stars* will be written by Straczynski and feature art by Keu Cha and Jason Gorder.

Stars' story unfolds in a sphere far removed (and separate) from the flashy, often supernatural world of the Top Cow Universe. Instead, Straczynski's tale begins in a small town in the heartland of America, and follows the rise and fall of 113 people—called *Specials*—who are imbued with superhuman powers by an extraterrestrial phenomenon.

Pederson, Ill., is the lucky town that's pelted by the mysterious phenomenon in 1969. The story follows the town's metahuman spawn from the birth of the children—who become the "rising stars" the book takes its name from—to their deaths 64 years later. Among them are heroes and villains, poets and policemen, religious zealots and factory workers...and perhaps even a serial killer.

"This is an Earth that's never had superheroes before," says Straczynski. "Everyone who was *in utero* at the time, whether they were conceived nine months ago and about to be born, or were conceived that night, is affected by it and they're born with abilities 'far beyond those of mortal men.' The story follows how the world reacts to them and how they react to the world, and how the world changes them and how they change the world."

SECRET ORIGINS

Call *Rising Stars* love's labor found. Straczynski, who's written and produced such TV shows as "Murder She Wrote" and the new "Twilight Zone," and gained both fame and

SUPERSTARS Set apart from the rest of the Top Cow Universe, *Rising Stars* features the *Specials*, an eclectic, superhuman mix of outcasts, reluctant heroes and born leaders.

critical acclaim for his science fiction epic "Babylon 5," counts himself a lifelong comics fan. When it came time for Straczynski to learn to read, comics were his teacher. His home is decorated heavily with comic book art. And, over the years, his collection of funnybooks has swelled to "thousands and thousands."

Even when Straczynski stuck his head in the stars, serving as both executive producer and lead writer for his Emmy award-winning "Babylon 5," he secretly wanted to create comics. He flirted briefly with comic book writing in the past, penning individual issues for DC Comics' *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5* and *Teen Titans Spotlight*, as well as an issue of the now-defunct, NOW Comics' *Twilight Zone* (see "Comic Babylon," page 59). But *Rising Stars* marks Straczynski's first attempt at regular comic book series writing.

And Straczynski plans to start *Stars* off with a bang, throwing readers right into the newborn *Specials*' first conflict. The first issue opens amid a heated debate over governmental powers; when the super-babies are born, the U.S. government moves to take an active hand in their development. But after an unfortunate soul accidentally dies at the hands of one of the babies—who can't yet control their superpowers—things get considerably worse. The powers-that-be seek to control all the children.

In doing so, the government butts heads with hordes of angry parents who're asking the question: Just how free are people in the land of the free? Ultimately, a compromise is forged in the form of Dr. William Welles, a physician who's assigned by the Supreme Court to monitor and keep an eagle eye on the *Specials*.

While plans for future issues are more nebulous, Straczynski plans to start focusing on specific characters—such as Jason Miller, who takes the code name "Flagg" and becomes a corporate enforcer, and John Simon, who becomes a sort of "big brother" to the *Specials*—all for the purpose of exploring what life with superpowers would really be like.

Growing up is difficult for anyone, but more so for a person gifted—or cursed—with superpowers. As with any normal human, Straczynski's creations will fight to find a place in the world, struggle to choose a career, and hunt for fulfillment. But unlike normal humans, the *Specials* must also deal with abil-



VITAL STATS: J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI



BORN: July 17, 1954 in Paterson, N.J.

BASE OF OPERATIONS: Los Angeles, Calif. "My house is art deco meets Superman. It's a combination of classic art deco with comic book and animation art all throughout. It's a house that screams to anyone who walks by. 'An eccentric lives here.'"

OCCUPATION: Creator/writer/executive producer of TV's forthcoming "Babylon 5: The Crusade" and writer for *Top Gun: Coming*, 24-hour mini-series *Rising Stars*.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Won three Emmy Awards for "Babylon 5," which he created, wrote and executive produced; served two years as writer and producer for TV's long-lived "Murder She Wrote" and was story editor for the new version of "The Twilight Zone."

THE ONE THING ABOUT HIM THAT NOBODY KNOWS: "I'm afraid of heights."

THE FICTIONAL ALIEN HE'D MOST LIKE TO SEE CONQUER EARTH: *Barbarello* ■ GO

ities that set them very far apart from the rest of the world.

"It's 113 individuals, all who have something different about them and they can choose which way they want to go," says Straczynski. "Unlike someone who's given a power ring and is told, 'You must go out and fight for justice,' they might say, 'No, I don't want to do that. I want to have a job as a normal guy. Don't bother me with this hero crap.'"

As a result, Straczynski hopes to flesh out his characters as "normal" humans and, from there, explore how each one handles their abilities differently. Like a sword that cuts two ways, a Special will shape his or her power, while the power will in turn shape the Special. As a result, personalities will play a big part in the way each person's powers develop.

For example, imagine if 50 people were all born with the power to read minds. Some people, because of personality traits, might be able to use the power more easily than others. Others might find their personalities hinder their ability to enter people's minds. A few in the group might even interpret this mental telepathy in different ways, meaning they could use their power differently than their counterparts.

Straczynski offers yet another example: "A number of [the Specials] fly, but not all in the same way," he says. "One black kid, he can fly, but he can only fly five feet above the ground. What [his limitation] stems from is self-image problems."

By the same token, Straczynski says an individual's powers will influence his personality. "One person is invulnerable," says Straczynski. "Well, what does that really give you? He's not super-

powerful. He's not strong. He can't fly. You just can't hurt him. The only thing he can feel is what he eats, so he gets really, really fat. So we have this guy who is invulnerable and fat and works in a local factory. That's all he can really do."

Socially, the Specials will sink or swim in a world that's previously been devoid of metahumans. Mankind, as a whole, generally fears what it doesn't understand, and being born with superpowers paints a big target on the Specials. Not only will these newly emerged metahumans confront their neighbors' fear and distrust, but they'll have the added burden of trying to master their strange abilities—before the powers take control of them.

"There are physical conflicts as they begin to go up against one another," adds Straczynski. "They know that in the end, only one of their kind can stop someone else from the group should that person go the wrong way."

The worst, though, is served up last. "Eventually," says Straczynski, "some of them turn good and some turn bad, and some have to hunt down the others for legal reasons. At one point in the story line, someone begins to kill the various affected individuals, starting off with the least-powered ones. They don't know who's doing it, but it could be one of their own kind. They have to find out who and why...and that information will tear them apart."

GIVING BIRTH

Before the mystery could unfold, though, Straczynski and Cha faced the monumental task of creating their new world and its inhabitants. It was Straczynski's job to sketch out character names,

"When I approached Top Cow with *Rising Stars*, I told them I wanted to write a book that would challenge comics like *Watchmen* and *Kingdom Come*."

J. Michael Straczynski, creator/writer

powers and histories. He then handed these biographies to Cha to design each person's look and, if appropriate, costume. According to Cha, the process was mostly collaborative, although Straczynski sometimes gave specific instructions for certain characters' appearances.

"It's a challenge," says Cha. "I have a lot of characters that I have to design. There're 30 main characters that we focus on. The rest are characters that come in and out [of the story]."

While *Rising Stars* features an ensemble cast à la Kurt Busiek's *Astro City*, Straczynski points out that a handful of characters will leap to the forefront and serve as the book's unofficial narrators. And as for the overall feel, he's aiming for a more realistic look.

"A lot of books, not Top Cow's in particular, but in general, tend to have all overly muscled guys who are almost identical pounding on each other," says Straczynski. "I want to go back to more character-based stories and artwork that isn't almost a parody of itself."

With that in mind, Straczynski cites Alan Moore's classic, apocalyptic two-part Superman story, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Steel?" in *Action Comics* #583 and *Superman* #423, as well as Moore's other epic, *Watchmen*, as prime examples of great comic stories. It's this type of revelatory, gut-wrenching story he says he's aspiring to with *Rising Stars*.

The end result of this stab at realism may well drive *Rising Stars* away from standard superhero fare. And along the way, some well-entrenched comic book traditions are destined to crumble, with Straczynski firmly intending to take the tried-(or tired)-and-true and discard it in favor of a brand-new status quo. Straczynski's new order will permeate the series, from its characters to its rather unique setting: America's heartland.

"One reason why I wanted to set *Rising Stars* in Illinois," says Straczynski, "is because it's the heartland of the country. How does middle America, the average person, react to having someone down the street who can do these things? [What happens when] you now feel kind of silly talking to someone who you grew up with?"

By choosing Pederson as the book's focus, he's also bucked perhaps the most obvious cliché—the notion that a "superhero" book must be set in a sprawling metropolis. Beyond that, setting the book in Pederson also affords Straczynski more room to roll over other comic traditions such as secret identities. Because Pederson is such a small, close-knit community, everyone knows everyone else, making it impossible for any super-powered individual to keep their real name hidden from the public.

"What's cool about it is it turns the [secret-identity] cliché upside down since they all know each other," says Straczynski. "The nearest parallel would be if you said, 'What if Superman, Batman, the Joker and Lex Luthor all grew up together and know each other's true names? How would that affect their relationship?'"

Yet another comic truism scheduled for demolition is the idea of the dystopian future, a notion that doesn't

MILLER TIME Out of the 113 superhumans in *Rising Stars*, Straczynski will focus on about 30 main characters, including Jason Miller (a.k.a. Flagg), one of the few who uses his powers as a superhero.

VITAL STATS: KEU CHA

BORN: September 7, 1974, in Laos

BASE OF OPERATIONS: Top Cow's offices in Santa Monica, Calif. Try to call him at home and you're out of luck—his phone has been temporarily disconnected.

OCCUPATION: Penciler, *Rising Stars*

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: *Darknight*, *Iron Horse*, *Star Wars*, *Star Wars* artwork. Also provided artwork for the game manual to Eidos Interactive's *Duke* video game.

THE ONE THING ABOUT HIM THAT NOBODY KNOWS: "I like to eat pho—it's a Vietnamese soup-based dish." And its ingredients? "I want to keep that mysterious."

WHEN NO ONE'S LOOKING IN THE TOP COW OFFICES: "I like to crumple paper and try to shoot baskets. I'm a basketball freak." ■ GO



STRACZYNSKI'S STARS

SOME RISING STARS SHINE A LITTLE DIMMER THAN MOST, AND SOME A LITTLE BIT DIMMER THAN THEIR COMPATRIOTS. THEY'RE STARS' STARS, AND ONE OF THEM DOESN'T EVEN HAVE SUPERPOWERS. SERVING UP INTRODUCTIONS IS CREATOR/WRITER J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI, WHO PROVIDES COMMENTARY ABOUT HIS MOST LUMINOUS HEROES.

DR. WILLIAM WELLES

WHO IS HE: Welles is the physician assigned by the government to monitor the Specials' development.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "He's there for pretty much all their lives, up until the last 20 years. In a way, he becomes the one person they can all talk to."

DR. SIMON WELLES

WHO IS HE: Simon is the Specials' doctor, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "Simon is a doctor who's been around for a long time. He's got a lot of experience with the Specials, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials. He's got a lot of experience with the Specials, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials."

JOHN WILSON

WHO IS HE: A big-brother-type to all of the Specials, Simon's sensitive to, and able to control, various kinds of energy.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "Simon has a shy nature (and) hates the part of himself that's violent, but is driven to use his powers in a good cause."

DR. JAMES WELLES

WHO IS HE: James is the Specials' doctor, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "James is a doctor who's been around for a long time. He's got a lot of experience with the Specials, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials."

MATTHEW BRIGHT

WHO IS HE: Bright is the first to leap into heroism, becoming a law enforcement officer even though he initially hid his powers.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "Bright begins the road to becoming a national figure, a true, self-effacing hero, referred to by the others in the group as the 'best of us.'"

FRANK WELLES

WHO IS HE: Frank is the Specials' doctor, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "Frank is a doctor who's been around for a long time. He's got a lot of experience with the Specials, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials."

JOSHUA WELLES

WHO IS HE: Given the name "Joshua" by his father, Joshua is a member of an ultra-religious agenda.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "He was raised in an extremely right-wing religious family and uses his abilities (to) fight the forces behind abortion clinics and other agendas not favored by extremists."

DR. JAMES WELLES

WHO IS HE: James is the Specials' doctor, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "James is a doctor who's been around for a long time. He's got a lot of experience with the Specials, and he's got a lot of experience with the Specials."

LIE JACKSON

WHO IS HE: A runaway at an early age, Jackson can control flame, but not his own violent tendencies.
STRACZYNSKI SAYS... "He's a somewhat unstable individual given pyrotechnic abilities by the force. His eventual fate is the key incident to a massive conflict long brewing among the Specials." ■ GO

interest Straczynski. "One of the things that bothers me about a lot of the books I see is that they're dark and almost unrelentingly grim," says Straczynski. "Rising Stars is an optimistic book. I don't want it to be a downer. This is a book about heroes. It's about how people become heroes. It's about the consequences of our choices."

RISE AND SHINE

Rising Stars begins with a flash of light, but the comic almost went up in a puff of smoke. After developing the book's story, Straczynski began painstakingly researching comic book companies. His search ended at Top Cow. Besides being a fan of Top Cow's comics, Straczynski knew of the company's storied history, as well as its reputation for quality. Most importantly, he thought—quite correctly—that the company would allow him the complete and total creative freedom he sought.

But when Straczynski contacted Top Cow through its Website to send a preliminary pitch for *Rising Stars*, he was met with incredulity. "They didn't believe it was me," says Straczynski. "They were sure it had to be a gag. The first e-mail I got was, 'Is this really you?' I guess that's because people at the executive producer level don't directly get involved in comics."

David Wohl, Top Cow's editor-in-chief, fielded the e-mail and tossed it to Brad Foxhoven, the company's president. Both were intrigued by the idea, loved Straczynski's synopsis for the book and, after meeting with the creator, gave him the freedom he wanted and green-lighted the project. But according to Straczynski, some of the Top Cow staff initially had their doubts.

"When I approached Top Cow with *Rising Stars*, I told them I wanted to write a book that would challenge comics like *Watchmen* and *Kingdom Come*," says Straczynski. "Brad said there was some amusement at this; the word 'presumptuous' was bandied about. Then I turned in the book's first script and it went hand to hand throughout the company, with everyone getting in line to read the thing. According to Brad, no one's laughing now."

Beyond helping Straczynski fulfill his comic book dreams, Top Cow has big plans for *Rising Stars*. The company, which is expanding to other media such as TV shows and video games, may use this new series to branch out in other areas.

"This is the first step," says Foxhoven, "hopefully along the lines of an expanded relationship [with Straczynski]. We have other things we're talking about doing, other properties we want to develop, and other ways we can work together on down the road."

Right now, though, *Rising Stars* will remain just a comic book, with all parties involved

SIMON SAYS Another one of *Rising Stars*' chief protagonists, John Simon (a.k.a. Poet) unofficially becomes a "big brother" to the rest of the Specials, despite his shyness, sensitivity—and sometimes violent nature.

working to make the title the best it can be—and that includes avoiding the normal perils usually associated with creator-owned series. Unfortunately, creative freedom often gives creators a license of sorts to be lazy and miss deadlines, but Straczynski remains firm on his ability to produce a book on a regular basis—even while juggling numerous writing and producing duties on his forthcoming "Babylon 5" spin-off series, "Babylon 5: The Crusade."

"We're right on schedule and I anticipate keeping it that way," says Straczynski, who at press time planned to have issues #0-#3 fully plotted by the end of January, ensuring a smooth start for the series. "One of the things that 'Babylon 5' taught me is how to keep a production schedule going. If the book's not out on time, I'll know why."

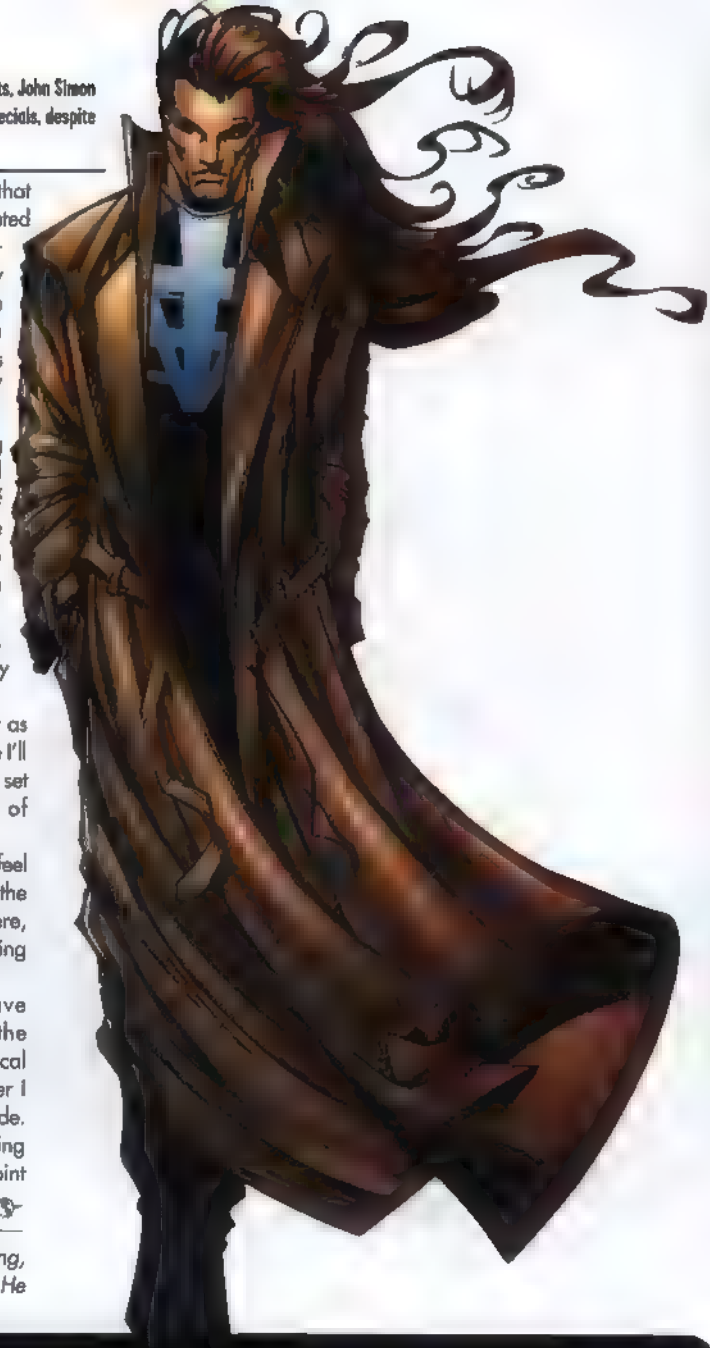
And just like "Babylon 5" and its "Crusade" sequel, Straczynski's leaving room for *Rising Stars*' finite story line to be expanded if the series is a hit.

"If the *Rising Stars* universe works out as popular as I think it's going to be," says Straczynski, "then maybe I'll go back and do a couple of other series that were set during those 64 years and follow one or two of the characters."

But one gaze at the sky is all Straczynski needs to feel optimistic about his chances at success. He points to the fact that there are 10 million "Babylon 5" fans out there, and all the things they like about the show's storytelling are included in *Rising Stars*.

"It's character-based, where actions have consequences," says Straczynski. "It starts at the beginning. It has a middle and an end. It's about ethical choices that characters have to make. And whether I succeed or fall flat on my face is for the readers to decide. But that kind of challenge is certainly what I'm striving for, because if you can't try for the best, what's the point of doing it?"

More a nougaty-sweet snack treat than human being, Greg Orlando's star hangs somewhere over Uranus. He was threatened at gunpoint to make this bad joke.



COMIC BABYLON STRACZYNSKI'S PREVIOUS COMICS 'STARS'

His eyes are turned skyward to "Babylon 5: The Crusade" and his brain is focused on *Rising Stars*, but J. Michael Straczynski's heart lies with comic books. He's collected thousands of them over the years and has even created a few himself. Here are his most notable works...

BABYLON 5: IN VALEN'S NAME #1-#3

CREDITS: Plot and issue #1 script

PUBLISHED: DC Comics, March-May 1998

THE SKINNY: When the doomed station Babylon 5 mysteriously reappears again from the past, Captain Sheridan and crew rush to investigate. Once there, they're attacked by fearsome aliens who send it plummeting toward Earth's surface.

...to escape the station and learn its secrets. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to do that.



BABYLON 5: #5-#8

CREDITS: Plot

PUBLISHED: DC Comics

June-September 1995

THE SKINNY: Shot down and crash-landing on a Centauri-held planet, Babylon 5 security chief John Miller uncovers a conspiracy by the evil and enigmatic Shadows. Oddly enough, this conspiracy involves Centauri's past, when he was a drunkard pilot for

young politicians on their way to become evil, villainous telepaths and a huge Shadow craft.

STAR TREK #16

CREDITS: Plot and script

PUBLISHED: DC Comics, February 1991

THE SKINNY: Visiting the dying planet Theta VII, Captain Kirk discovers that the mysterious omnipotent alien named Rell has stayed behind to witness his world's demise. Rell reacts attempts to save him, so Kirk joins him, guarding that Rell won't sacrifice him as well. But when Theta VII's destruction comes, it's a last-minute transporter beam out he too late!

GO

WITCHING HOUR

After three-and-a-half years of mystery, the secrets of the Witchblade will finally be revealed—along with more questions

Change is a difficult thing. Just ask Sara Pezzini. When the New York City homicide detective became the latest wielder of the mysterious Witchblade gauntlet, her life changed forever. No longer investigating simple murders, she now had to contend not only with the gauntlet's destructive powers and those who sought to control them, but the mysteries of its origins as well.

But while Sara's life's not about to get any easier, the thick mists shrouding the Witchblade's secrets are starting to disperse, revealing a whole new layer of mysteries beneath. Creators David Wohl, Christina Z. and Michael Turner first introduced readers to Sara and the Witchblade, the artifact that merged with her, three-and-a-half years ago. And during that time, they've hinted, teased and tortured readers with questions about the mysterious relic: What is it? Where did it come from? What is its purpose? This year, change of a different kind is in the air, and it's time for some answers.

"We're finally going to delve into just where the Witchblade came from—in a way," teases writer Wohl. "There have been a lot of questions about its origin and what its agenda is. In 1999, we're gonna begin revealing some secrets, but some of those answers may just create more questions."

In other words, yes, it's time for some enlightenment, but don't worry—the book's basic tone isn't going to change. As the series' many fans have come to expect and to love, some secrets will remain hidden. Still, after so many issues spent in an arcane haze, when fans could only wonder about the myriad mysteries behind the Witchblade's ageless power, there have been more secrets revealed in the last several issues than in the previous three years. And knowledge is power.

This era of disclosure marks a new chapter in the series' ongoing story, and the change comes at a pivotal turning point. Having recently bid farewell to fan-favorite artist and co-creator Turner, who left *Witchblade's* pages last year to launch Top Cow's latest hit, *Fathom*, *Witchblade* stands ready to accelerate into a new, high-intensity period of creative excitement. There's a new regular artist in town, Randy Green, who's settled in just in time for writers Wohl and Christina Z. to leap head-first into stories they've been hinting at since the very first issue.

CUTTING IN

For those who've never encountered Sara before, the woman also known as Witchblade is actually the latest in a long line of hosts

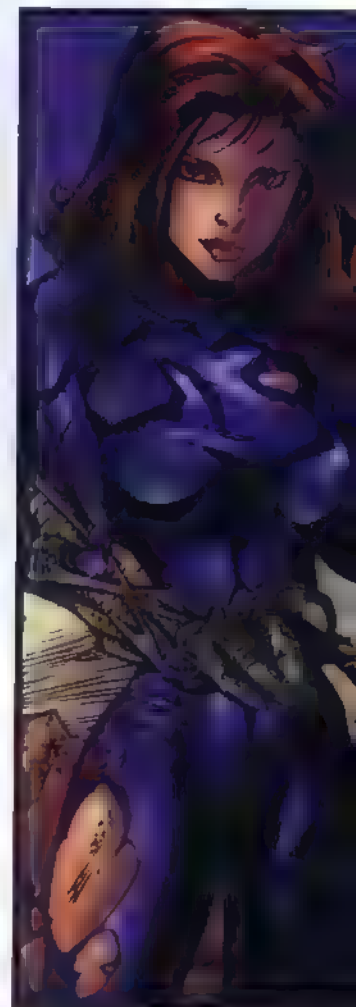
the ancient and mysterious artifact has had throughout its history. A weapon of supernatural power, the Witchblade gauntlet can grow and expand to surround Sara in living armor while striking out with uncanny, deadly force. Also seemingly sentient, it has its own agenda, and has been known to bolt to other hosts if it feels they will better serve its still-unknown purposes.

Sara's early battles were spent trying to keep the Witchblade from falling into the wrong hands, primarily those of Kenneth Irons, the all-powerful magnate hell-bent on possessing its power. Believing Irons dead after he flung himself from the top of a skyscraper, Sara's next battles were to maintain—and gain better—control of her weapon, preventing it from wreaking deadly havoc on all those around her.

Throughout the early issues, Sara (and readers) sat in awe of her gauntlet's dark, primordial powers, perhaps overcome by its timeless mysteries. Recently, however, there's been a pervasive feeling of renewed purpose to the book, as though the time for answers had finally arrived and they'd come through the strength of Sara's will alone.

While Sara was separated from the Witchblade—it had sensed her doubts about wielding it, so it bonded with assassin Ian Nottingham—she learned that it could still exert control over her, even possessing her briefly despite the fact they were no longer physically joined.

FATAL INSTINCT? Following a brief separation from the gauntlet, Sara's slowly beginning to accept the Witchblade's presence in her life, but is it a decision she'll live to regret?



And soon after, despite having seen them hundreds of times before, Sara paid close attention to the gauntlet's three gems for the first time. During her fight to reclaim the Witchblade from Nottingham, she was forced to shoot the red gem off it in order to defeat him. While the gem's absence seemingly made the gauntlet easier to control, removing the stone has actually proven chaotic—the Witchblade's behavior has become harder to predict than ever before, and its actions far more deadly.

It's a move typical of the series' new period of disclosure. By

revealing a long-held secret, it's only brought up another: If the stones are integral to the gauntlet's function, how will Sara manage to control the Witchblade now that one of the jewels is lost? And while a costumed hero whose power runs amok doesn't exactly sound like your typical comic book hero, as Z. explains, *Witchblade* isn't your typical comic.

"Unlike a lot of characters, Sara isn't fully aware of all her powers and weaknesses," says Z. "Since she's a character who is always willing to push the envelope in her life, you never know if, during a struggle, she'll triumph or fail. She's so cool to work with [because of] her failures. I think it's always interesting to follow a character's life who is both very powerful but often makes mistakes, like most of us do."

Although the idea of a superhero unable to control her own powers is an intriguing one, for the *Witchblade* folks, that's not enough. In order to make it a truly unique book, Wohl and Z. work hard at creating a world populated by heroes rather than superheroes.

"The people in *Witchblade*'s world aren't used to seeing costumed guys flying around and slugging it out with super-baddies," maintains Wohl. "When there's a supernatural element around, it's a big deal. We try to think about how people would really feel if they saw the *Witchblade* in action. It'd be scary!

We try to stay reality-based, with some supernatural stuff thrown in. Michael [Turner] used to get mad at me when I called Sara a superhero—he never wanted anyone to consider this that kind of world."

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Despite leaving to create *Fathom* last year, Turner's influence is still felt on *Witchblade*, and will continue to be for quite awhile. As one of the book's creators, he helped establish the look and feel of the series, as well as cementing it among the fans as a huge sales success.

"I did *Witchblade* for about 24 issues, counting a couple of crossovers, and I'd love to do more," admits Turner, who left behind both his co-plotting and penciling duties. "I've still got a few *Witchblade* stories I'd like to tell, but my attention's gotta be on *Fathom* now. I wish I could do two books a month, but I can't."

CHARACTER PROFILE SARA PEZZINI

SIMON SAYS The *Witchblade* often communicates its desires telepathically, even sometimes urging Sara to kill. The *Witchblade* also shares flashes of its history with Sara, giving her glimpses into the experiences of past wielders.

MIGHTY MORPHS The *Witchblade* morphs itself into any shape it chooses, preferring either a gauntlet (with heavy armor) or an innocent-looking bracelet.

RICH HISTORY Former bearers of the *Witchblade* have included Jona of Arc and a female advisor to Alexander the Great.

DEADLY OFFENSES The *Witchblade* attacks in two ways: shooting bolts of deadly force, or twisting itself into tendrils that can pierce, grasp, choke or bludgeon.

HEALTH CARE The *Witchblade* has healed several fatal gunshot wounds for Sara. But in trying to heal her dead partner, she only reanimated his corpse.

SARA PEZZINI

First Appearance: *Cyblade/Shi Special—The Battle for Independents*

A hardened New York City police detective, Sara is the current wielder of the *Witchblade*, an eerie, bejeweled, seemingly sentient gauntlet with uncontrollable power and an agenda of its own. After a series of harrowing adventures in which the enigmatic entity has consis-

tently protected her life, Sara has begun to slowly rely on and accept the *Witchblade*. However, according to series co-writers David Wohl and Christina Z., Sara's trust will be short-lived. Apparently, she has not even begun to realize the mysterious weapon's full potential, and all that will come to a head in future issues with the manifestation of never-before-seen capabilities. ■ SB

Nonetheless, *Witchblade* finds itself in good hands. After several issues of fill-ins, Randy Green took over as regular artist with last November's issue #26. After working on assorted issues of *Shi*, *Superman*, *Legends of the DC Universe* and a six-issue run on *Cable*, Green was ecstatic to discover he'd been given the keys to the Top Cow kingdom.

"I'd been doing assorted pages on *Ascension* and *Witchblade*, just helping out," says Green. "I wasn't really thinking about doing the book, though. I was hoping I might get some work on *Tales of the Witchblade*, that kind of stuff. When David Wohl told me they were definitely interested in me doing the book, [for me] it was kind of a no-brainer, and really exciting. Weird little success story, but hey, it worked out, right?"

So far, it's worked out beautifully. Although Green was never truly anxious about the prospect of filling Turner's artistic shoes, so many people expected him to be nervous that eventually a few worries started creeping in.

"A lot of people started asking me whether I was nervous replacing Turner, so I started thinking about it," admits Green. "I know that so much of the popularity of the book beyond the writers was [because of] him. The fans still talk about him, but I don't really mind. Hey, the guy's got fans! It would suck if he left and nobody said anything. I'm just glad we've got those kind of fans on the book. Hopefully, if I can steal some of them away, we'll all be happy."

Although the fans were sad to see Turner go, many have already embraced Green's work on the series, due, in equal parts, to some plain old good timing and to his new, exciting style of graphic storytelling.

"I think Top Cow did a smart thing by having that little buffer, those three or four issues where they had me and several others doing a few pages, so it wasn't an abrupt change from all-Mike to all-someone else," says Green. "When I came on, he'd already been gone, so I think the expectations were different. I think the fans were ready for someone regular to come onboard."

Having landed in Top Cow's Promised Land, Green has no plans to leave anytime in the near future, hoping for the opportunity to spread out some roots. Strangely enough, Green finds himself on a

THE PRINCESS BRIDE

THE NEXT *WITCHBLADE* 'TALE' BEGINS IN ANCIENT EGYPT, BUT FINISHES IN MODERN LOVE

Sara wasn't the first, and she definitely won't be the last. There have been—and will be—others.

Tales of the Witchblade is a quarterly anthology series that explores the eldritch gauntlet's past and offers glimpses into the future. But in terms of the story lines set before Sara's time, the idea is that, by illustrating its previous actions in self-contained stories, they'll explain the *Witchblade*'s ongoing agenda in the present. Beginning in issue #7, however, for the first time in its history, a *Tales* story line crosses over into the regular *Witchblade* title for its resolution.

"The story, as we have it laid out, takes place in the past and the present," says Bill O'Neil, who co-writes the three-part story line with former *Witchblade* artist and creator Michael Turner. "We're doing a two-part story taking place in ancient Egypt, followed up by a present-day segment in an issue of *Witchblade* itself."

Main artwork by Kau Cho, penciler of Top Cow's upcoming *Rising Stars* series, this tale is something of a departure: It's a love story. "It'll have action and adventure, but it's essentially a love story that centers around a goddess and a prince," says O'Neil. "It also centers around the princess who's supposed to marry that prince, and her jealous reaction. We're looking to explore what kind of chaos happens when an immortal and a mortal fall in love."

This upcoming *Tales* story line also deals with two characters previously seen in *Tomb Raider/Witchblade*: Buck and Basil. How do these two modern-day characters enter into the *Witchblade*'s past? "That's what you'll have to read the story for," laughs O'Neil. "You don't get to the ending until you've earned the ending." ■ SB

book he'd been hyping for years, long before Turner ever thought of leaving.

"I've been telling people for years this is a great book," gushes Green. "It's reminiscent of the '70s *Amazing*

Spider-Man issues, because people would buy it to find out what was going on with Peter Parker more than they wanted to see who *Spider-Man* was fighting. That's what *Witchblade* has. I'm really having a blast doing something that has all those soap-opera elements to it."

Comparing *Witchblade* and a soap opera is actually fairly accurate. Obscure story hints began dropping in the series' first issues, hints that have so far only just begun to bear fruit, yet promise to blossom soon. There are just as many aspects of Sara's personal life that keep readers coming back (her broken relationship with her sister, her frustrations at not knowing the facts behind her father's death, her reluctance to share any secrets with her partner Jake) as there are

SECRET GLOVE(II) Just as mysterious as the day she bonded with it, Sara will soon learn more about the *Witchblade* gauntlet's powers and agenda—and uncover more questions.



life-or-death, pseudo-superheroine problems plaguing her (Sara's inability to control her gauntlet, the resurrection of Kenneth Irons)

"We create very 3-D characters whom you could swear you've met before," says Z. with pride. "They all have their strengths and weaknesses. The characters are always so much fun to work with, the possibilities are nearly limitless. Each of them has a sort of yin and yang about them that will both empower and weaken them. And that's why it's exciting to do the book month in and month out."

For Wohl, the greatest part about going to work on *Witchblade* every morning is his privileged information—the cryptic knowledge he wields like a weapon, to be doled out in agonizingly slow bits, just enough to keep readers wanting more.

"It's kinda cool knowing what the *Witchblade* is really about and what its absolute agenda is," says Wohl. "I know—or at least I hope—there are a lot of people who are really curious about the *Witchblade*, its origin and what it's really about. I love being able to reveal it slowly, giving people little glimpses to what their appetites and hopefully surprising them regularly with new revelations."

DIGGING DEEPER

Now more than ever, soon after celebrating their book's 25th issue and beginning the march toward its 50th, the creators feel the time is right to finally begin revealing Sara's many secrets.

"Lots of stuff is going on," exclaims Z. "We're going to be focusing on paying off many of the mysteries we've built up over the past several issues, namely the questions about Sara's father, his untimely death, [Sara's boss Joe Siry's] dirty little secrets he's carried since issue #1, and of course, many new things about Nottingham. He's just a world of mystery. Beyond that, you'll just have to wait and see!"

Had the fans been asked at the beginning of *Witchblade*'s run what secret they most wanted revealed, finding out where Sara's gauntlet came from would've been the most likely answer. More than three years later, however, just as that secret stands ready to be revealed, there's a new, perhaps more interesting question: Just what are the *Witchblade*'s full capabilities?

In recent issues, the *Witchblade*'s been acting in an unprecedented fashion. In issue #24, for example, when Sara was temporarily separated from it, the *Witchblade* still managed to take control of Sara's body, somehow covering her with its living armor, even though it was nowhere around! Despite being alone and powerless, much more grounded in the reality of a New York cop's daily life, Sara suddenly found herself pulled right back into a world of arcane, shrouded mysteries.

Just as the *Witchblade* will continue evolving, so too will the book itself. For Wohl and Z., this shift in the gauntlet's capabilities is the perfect metaphor for how the series continues to develop and expand, pushing the boundaries of conventional comic book heroism and taking it to another, exciting level. Fans may have loved *Witchblade*'s past, but with exciting new changes in store, the future looks brightest of all.

"The *Witchblade*'s evolution is something we've been planning a long time now," says Z. "And it's about time we show more of what it's capable of doing. Up to this point, the *Witchblade* has been very reactive. We're going to focus on it being proactive. And of course, whether this is to Sara's liking or not, you'll just have to experience it. The moments that make this weapon worth it will blow everyone away. And those moments are coming up soon!"

Los Angeles-based writer Scott Brick loves to run around town with his mystical gauntlet fully exposed, but can't understand why people tease him about its size.

WITCHBLADE'S WILD RIDE

WIZARD LAYS BARE THREE-AND-A-HALF YEARS WORTH OF WITCHBLADE RELATIONSHIPS, MYSTERIES AND MURDERS

WITCHBLADE'S COMING OF AGE: COMIC BOOK YOU NEED A SCORING SYSTEM TO FIND TRAIL OF EVERYONE WHO'S FATHER AND SON, HUNGRY FOR MORE AND WHOSE REVENGE WITH WHOM? WHEN YOU CAN GET IT IN HIS OWN

IAN NOTTINGHAM

While under Saratone's mental control, Nottingham killed Taketa, a man who was like family to him. (Darkness #10)

SADAYUKI TAKETA



Under Saratone's mental control, Nottingham drained Jackie of the power of the Darkness. (Darkness #10)

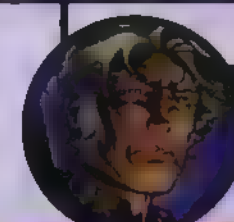
JACKIE ESTACADO



Despite intense mutual attraction, these two nearly killed one another several times, most recently when Sara retrieved the *Witchblade* from her. (WB #25)

Ordered by his Uncle Frankie to retrieve the *Witchblade*, Jackie got his head handed to him instead. (WB #18)

Ian nearly killed Jake by stabbing him with the *Witchblade*, trying to stop his investigation into D. Gavin Taylor's church. (WB #25)



JAKE MCCARTHY

They were master and lackey until Nottingham betrayed Irons. Recently, they apparently renewed a more equal business partnership. (WB #21)

Taylor hired Nottingham to kill Caroline Lemay, an informant from his church. Nottingham turned on Taylor when he attacked Setsuka. (WB #28)

D. GAVIN TAYLOR



Julie helped Jake ensure the death of his former fiancée, Cynthia Stewart, then made the connection between D. Gavin Taylor and her murder. (WB #22)

JULIE PEZZINI



Never the best of friends, Sara nevertheless swore to kill whoever traumatized her sister Julie. Little did she know it was Ken Irons. (WB #24)

Despite twice saving his life, Sara nearly got her second partner killed during her battle with Ian Nottingham. (WB #25)

This nearly immortal billionaire seemingly died trying to possess the *Witchblade*'s power, although he's recently resurfaced. (WB #25)

Dannette allegedly used a fraction of the *Witchblade*'s power to kill Vincent Pezzini. Before dying, Dannette "told" the club do. (WB #14)

DANNETTE BOUCHER



Rivals for underworld power, Franchetti tried to organize a truce between the Mafia and Yakuza when Irons supposedly died. (Darkness #8)

FRANCHETTI



Wanting to possess the *Witchblade*, Don Franchetti ordered Jackie Estacado to retrieve it by killing Sara. (WB #10)

Dead from mysterious circumstances, Sara recently saw a photograph of her father together with Ken Irons and D. Gavin Taylor, although she cannot imagine why her father associated with such men. (WB #27)

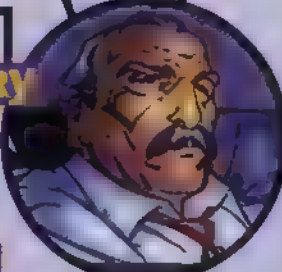
VINCENT PEZZINI



The two partners investigated the Microwave killer back in the '70s; Siry mistakenly believed Vince became one of the killer's victims. (WB #12)

Sara's boss has been a father figure since Vincent Pezzini died. Sara's aware Joe knows more about Vince's death than he's telling. (WB #26)

JOE SIRY

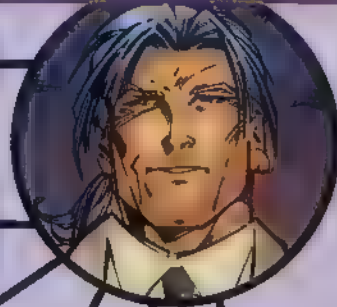


Sara's superior officer at the NYPD, Lofrumento suspended her for mishandling the Microwave murders. (WB #15)

ROY LOFRUMENTO



KENNETH IRONS



Despite heading the Church of Holy Prosperity, Taylor actually works for Irons, a "sweet partner" who recently took over. (WB #25)

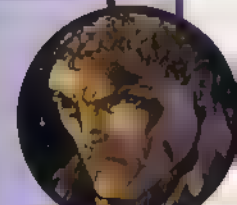
A member of his church, Julie slept with Taylor in an attempt to learn about Cynthia Stewart's murder. (WB #24)

Julie witnessed Irons' takeover of D. Gavin Taylor's church. Despite not wanting any witnesses, Irons let Julie live. (WB #25)

Irons ignored his wife in his crusade to find the *Witchblade*, later using her in a vain attempt to control it. (WB #13-14)

Irons' son by Dannette Boucher, Wilder managed his father's business interests after he "died," even moving into his penthouse. (Darkness #3)

After entering into a secret, binding agreement over 20 years ago, Irons recently reminded Siry to fulfill his commitment. (WB #27)



BRUCE WILDER

They had a past relationship when Joe associated with Wilder's father, Ken Irons. Siry killed Wilder for nearly killing Sara. (WB #19)



ERIC SKETH

This L.A. homicide cop's been temporarily assigned to Sara while Jack McCarthy heals from an attack by Ian Nottingham. (WB #26)



LISA BUZANIK

Sara's been Lisa's surrogate mother since Maria Buzanik got killed, recently saving Lisa from Dannette Boucher. (WB #14)



RUTH

Sara calls Ruth "Mom" since she's been more of a mother to Sara than her real mother, Ruth's sister ever was. (WB #22)

SECOND COMING

New blood, new creators and a whole new attitude. *Ascension* is gearing up for the heights that creator Dave Finch has been shooting for.

What goes up, must come down? *Ascension* was doubtlessly 1997's Most Likely to Succeed, following as it did in the footsteps of Top Cow smashes *Witchblade* and *The Darkness*. With its novel concept (humans get caught up in a battle between warring factions of winged beings existing just beyond our field of perception), a dark, gothic feel and a killer creative team in writer/penciler Dave Finch and writer/inker Batt, *Ascension* was a surefire hit.

Instead, *Ascension* floundered. Despite healthy sales, the consistently late book saw Batt depart after just five issues, and a muddled, heavily political story arc left Finch frustrated. By issue #8, a whopping 10 artists were pitching in to get the book to press.

But that was then. Now, with the upcoming issue #12, the book's former background artist Brian Ching takes over full-time penciling duties. The following month, *Lady Death* and *Purgatori* scribe David Quinn climbs aboard to assist Finch with the writing chores. The new team promises fresh ideas told in a back-to-basics approach, straightforward storytelling and, above all else, consistency.

Perhaps *Ascension* is headed towards stardom after all.

A WORLD APART

"When I first started, I just wanted to do a book about people killing each other, you know?" laughs Finch. But from the get-go, *Ascension* has always been much more than heroes and villains whaling on one another.

The series opened by entangling two humans, hard-boiled soldier Lucien and headstrong scientist Andromeda, in a war between the Mineans and the Dayaks, a pair of winged races existing in reality just slightly removed from our own. Lucien and Andromeda, as well as another human, the evil Grigorieff, gained strange and fantastic powers to match those of their new otherworldly playmates.

The first story arc witnessed the Dayak's efforts to retrieve their powerful savior Voivodul from limbo, only to have the mega-powerful creature try to destroy Dayak and Minean alike. Since Voivodul's defeat, the series has focused on the political machinations of the hidden realm as its lead-

ers choose a new direction, and on the group of very powerful human politicians back on Earth who want the power of the Dayaks and the Mineans for themselves.

Much of the story has revolved around Petra, a young Minean who saw her father figure and clan leader, Sophocles, perish during events leading up to the battle against Voivodul. With that death, Petra was vaulted into the leadership of the Mineans, but her inexperience has made her easy prey for the manipulative Marcus, a Minean council member with an eye on the top seat himself. "Marcus is basically a politician in the very evil, [Republican U.S. Senator] Trent Lott conservative sort of sense," says Finch.

And in many ways, *Ascension* has packed its pages less with action than with political parable. "It's the way I see a lot of the political attitudes, infighting and partisanship [in the real

CARRIED AWAY Expect *Ascension* stars Andromeda and Lucien to be hiding in the wings for the next few months.

world]," says Finch. With the dual universes to play with, Finch has twice as much room to act out his political scenarios. "The thing is, all of the otherworldly figures, to a person, hate anybody from Earth because they see them as self-destructive. The irony is that they're just as bad themselves and they really don't see it."

Quinn sees a grander design when he explains his take on the book. "It's about

humankind basically having come to the point where it's either going to destroy itself or evolve into something more effective," he says. "In this book, there's a great sense of wonder about coming face to face with creatures who may be the real source of all of our mythology, of angels and devils and heroes and all that. So it's a powerfully mythic book. It's the struggle for survival and 'ascension,' or being shot to hell."

ASCENDING FUTURE

Finch and Quinn plan to spend the next few issues tying up a few loose ends and fleshing out a brand-new villain. Politics will give way to establishing conflict between our heroes and this latest bad-die, a mysterious and very dangerous exiled Minean named Rowina.

According to Finch, this villain may be new to the reader but her influence has been felt

CHARACTER PROFILE

LUCIEN and ANDROMEDA

WHIP-SMART Andromeda is far more intelligent than Lucien is, says Finch. "She's the brains to Lucien's brawn." She graduated Columbia University at age 16!

TOUR OF DUTY Lucien has served in the Marines and, according to writer David Quinn, participated in Special Military operations in Latin America and the Balkans.

WHEATIES EATER "He's eating fast, and very strong," says writer Dave Finch of Lucien.

FEELS YOUR PAIN Andromeda is an empath. "She can't read minds so much as emotions and connotations, unless it's really, really, really, really, really," notes Finch.

NOW YOU SEE HIM Unlike Andromeda, Lucien has the power of invisibility.

LITTLE ORPHAN ANDY As the series progresses, Quinn says it will be revealed that Andromeda's mom and dad have since shuffled off this mortal coil.

KEEPS ON TICKING Finch hasn't decided if ol' Lucien has a howling factor or not, but says, "He's been shot a couple times and it's not killed him."

SAX AND VIOLINS A child prodigy in science and the violin, Andromeda quit music at age 14 for reasons as yet undisclosed, says Quinn.

UNTRUE BLUE "We made her blue because we wanted to make sure it was obvious that she was evil for a little while," reveals Finch. "We decided to keep her that way. There's no real reason behind it."

THE BEST THERE IS Lucien's often tearing up the joint with those claws. "He's Wolverine mixed with the powers of an angel," says Finch.

LUCIEN

First Appearance: *Ascension* #0

A soldier, Lucien was working for Grigorieff before contact with the Mineans and Dayaks turned him into a winged, clawed warrior. Now he and Andromeda must come to terms with their place in this strange new world. He'll be taking a backseat over the next several issues as focus shifts toward Petra and Rowina, but Quinn hints that there's still much to learn about this mystery man.

ANDROMEDA

First Appearance: *Ascension* #0

A brilliant scientist, Andromeda let her self-righteousness get in the way of her common sense, and she soon found herself transformed into a blue-skinned empath who was briefly used for Grigorieff's evil purposes. "She actually ended up doing a lot more reprehensible stuff than the guy you would assume would do the worst stuff," says Finch. Expect Andy to remain in the shadows for a few months.

since the very beginning, long before her first appearance in November's issue #10. "Nobody realizes that they're really being manipulated by this Rowina chick who hangs out in this place really far away with a big snake wrapped around her," says Finch. Marcus, Lucien and Grigoriouff have already had their lives affected by Rowina's remote meddling, Lucien more than the others. "Lucien was dying until she intervened," explains Finch, referring to Lucien's brush with death after suffering numerous bullet wounds in issues #9-#10.

"And she's using Grigoriouff in her own way. She only has so much influence, but it's growing."

Developing Rowina's role in the *Ascension* universe will be top priority in the book's immediate future. "We really want to flesh her out and show how powerful and manipulative she is," says Quinn. "Rowina's going to be Petra's main adversary."

That's right—Petra. While Quinn isn't forgetting about Lucien and Andromeda, they'll be relegated to supporting status for at least a few months while Quinn and Finch turn their attention to the young leader of the Mineans. Viewing the world through Petra's eyes is important in making events "more immediate and clearer," says Quinn.

"There will also be some discovery with other members of the cast, but focused on how it relates to Petra."

LOOKING AHEAD

With the new crew on board, Finch is optimistic about the book's direction, and he's even confident *Ascension's* long-standing shipping delays will come to a welcome end. "Hopefully, things will get a little better now that I'm not penciling the thing," laughs Finch. "And I'm pretty confident with David Quinn that things will really start to come together."

Finch also has high hopes for new full-time penciler Brian Ching. "I wanted someone to capture the feel of the book, but at the same time I wanted somebody who'd be able to really develop his own thing and make it his own. And I think Brian really has a lot of potential to do that. He's already a great artist."

Ching, for his part, sounds less like a man expecting to take the comics world by storm and more like an artist in it for the long haul. "My goal is to find my style, to somehow find a way to turn them into my characters," he says. "That's my goal on *Ascension*, to find a way to make it my own and not be a Dave Finch rip-off."

Equally excited to get started is Quinn, since he's been a fan of the series from the start. "It's like a supernatural thriller, like a Stephen King or a Dean Koontz film, only with an unlimited special effects budget."

In the beginning, *Ascension* seemed like nothing less than the Second Coming. But after a year and a half, the expectations—and the goals—have changed. "I'd just like to see it as one of the books people look forward to reading," says Quinn.

It sounds as if he'll get his wish.

If Toyfare staff writer Tom Root had wings, this place would be an airport. Waitaminitt...that's not how the joke goes...

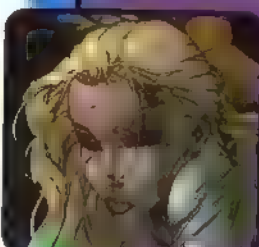
FLOCK TO IT

ASCENSION'S MOVERS AND SHAKERS AT A GLANCE

TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER, MORE HUNTING ON COASTS. ONE CHARACTER, REAL. ONE TOOL, REAL. AFTER TUBING, FIVE. AN. ONE DISCHARGES. SO. WHO DOES FIVE. CONF. GOT NAIL. THE STRANGE. CAN GET NAIL. THE



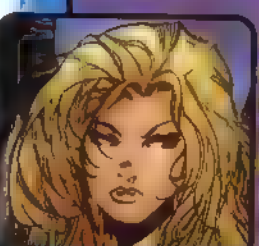
IF THIS DOESN'T GET YOU TO READ THIS SIDEBAR, NOTHING WILL.



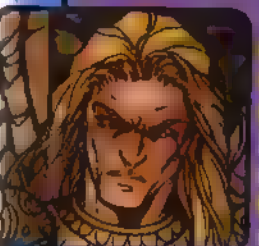
ASCENSION #10
OLD NEWS: ...
NEW NEWS: ...



ASCENSION #10
OLD NEWS: ...
NEW NEWS: ...



ASCENSION #10
OLD NEWS: ...
NEW NEWS: ...



ASCENSION #10
OLD NEWS: ...
NEW NEWS: ...

HEARTS OF DARKNESS

Hitman Jackie Estacado has a new partner in his world of murder, monsters and mayhem: ex-X-Man Scott Lobdell

Not every superhero thinks that with great power comes great responsibility. For mafioso Jackie Estacado, newfound power meant new ways to slaughter the bounty hunters, rival Mafia families, and supernatural forces that come gunning for him. Come to think of it, it may be wrong to call this guy a "hero" at all.

Certainly atypical of most comic book main characters, murder, mayhem and monsters are all in a day's work for the violent star of Top Cow's *The Darkness*. Jackie's a roguish hitman whose loyalty to his Mafia Don "uncle" is matched only by his appetite for pretty young women. Even his power, the Darkness, is unusual for comics—not because it represents chaotic disorder or because it thrives in the absence of light (hence the name), but because it's been passed down from father to son over the ages as the father automatically dies at the moment of conception. That means no sex, kids. Poor Jackie.

The good news is all this chaotic disorder has actually attracted one of the most well-known writers in comics. When Malachy Coney wraps up his nine-issue *Darkness* stint with this spring's issue #22, he's making room for celebrated X-Men veteran and new *Wildcats* scribe Scott Lobdell. "I had the opportunity to work on *Darkness/Batman* and found myself completely fascinated with Jackie," explains Lobdell. David Wohl quickly signed him for the book through *Darkness* #50 after seeing his proposal. "Scott saw a lot of promise in the character," says Wohl. "He's so into the mythos that he's always coming up with new ideas for the future, and I'm letting him do what he wants to."

ROUGH BOYS

Just as the Darkness' power to create anything he chooses opened a whole new world for Jackie Estacado, *The Darkness* assignment has unlocked a new creative landscape for Lobdell. "I spent six years writing about characters in a world that hates and fears them, and the heroism in striving to rise above their station in life and contribute to society," states Lobdell, referring to his tenure on Marvel's *Uncanny X-Men* that ended with summer 1997's "Operation: Zero Tolerance" story line. "I can't wait to do something dark for a change. It's like I've been writing situation comedies, and now I get to write feature films." And even though Lobdell plans to downplay the Darkness' "no sex" clause, he's making sure the book contains feature film content. "He's really playing up the racier themes," explains Wohl.

DARK AGE Darkness wielder Jackie Estacado (left) and his little Darklings are no slouches, but are they ready for new writer Scott Lobdell?

Orphaned at birth, Jackie was raised in a shelter until mob boss Don Franchetti came along. He adopted Jackie, rescuing him from an abusive priest, though condemning him to a sordid life of underworld crime. Since manifesting his powers on his 21st birthday, Jackie has used his abilities primarily to aid in his day-to-day business dealings—the kind that are typically paid up in blood. As Lobdell points out, "He's this completely unrepentant character that kills without compunction because of his Mafia ties." Those ties have proven to be the sole constant in Jackie's life, and have calloused him to the world.

"Jackie's a rough guy, a fighter," agrees Joe Benitez, the current penciler of *The Darkness*. "He was brought up to kill, but not to do so indiscriminately. Jackie's a precise hitman who's looking out for his adoptive uncle, and family is a strong motivating factor for a character." Indeed, it is the theme of family that exists beneath the surface of *The Darkness*, most conspicuously within the book's supporting cast, which is essentially a group of warring families.

"The great thing about Jackie's supporting cast," Lobdell points out, "is that they're all intricately linked to him." Besides his surrogate Mafia family of Don Franchetti and the Don's daughter Appalonia, Jackie also has to contend with the Angelus and Sonatine's Brotherhood of Darkness.

The Angelus, like the Darkness and Witchblade, is a power that has existed throughout time, requiring a human host to tap into its vast potential. Together, these three powers make up the Triad of Power, with the Angelus representing tyrannical law and order that opposes the Darkness' tendencies for chaos and the Witchblade's rampant destructive force. It's an ages-old battle that was recently renewed when the Angelus selected a new host—Mrs. Franchetti, Jackie's "aunt." After spending



years in a vegetative state brought on by witnessing Don Franchetti torture and kill her lover, Mrs. Franchetti now has the means to take revenge on her husband—and the Angelus has the opportunity to destroy Jackie and the Darkness in the process.

Sonatine, meanwhile, heads the Brotherhood of Darkness, a radical group that seeks to control Jackie so that they may exploit his powers to achieve their own ends. He's been trying unsuccessfully

for centuries to obtain the Darkness. "Sonatine aspires to be Jackie's archvillain," points out Lobdell, "but the harder he tries, the more difficult it becomes for him to get what he wants."

"All these characters are tripping over each other, each trying to screw the other over," says Lobdell. "Sonatine wants the power for himself, the Angelus is out for revenge on Jackie, and guys like Franchetti are in the background. They're all an integrated part of Jackie's life, and it makes

interweaving the cast not only simpler, but also essential to telling Jackie's story."

FAMILY LAW

Readers are finally going to get to see a "family" of Jackie's for the first time: his biological one. "We plan to do a lot of stuff about Jackie's *real* family rather than his adoptive one," reveals Wohl. "Scott intends to delve into where Jackie came from, and tell stories about relatives we haven't seen yet." This touches on the

CHARACTER PROFILE JACKIE ESTACADO

DARKLINGS Jackie has the ability to create living beings that do his bidding.

LIGHTS OUT Jackie's powers do have limitations; he can only manifest his abilities in the absence of light.

CREATOR-OWNED The Darkness has the power to create anything he chooses, from living tendrils to physical duplicates of himself.

HARD-KNOCK LIFE Jackie was raised in an orphanage by abusive priests until his adoption by Don Franchetti.

IN THE GENES The Darkness is passed on from generation to generation; once its bearer conceives a child, he instantly dies.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY Darkness bearers manifest their powers on their 21st birthday.

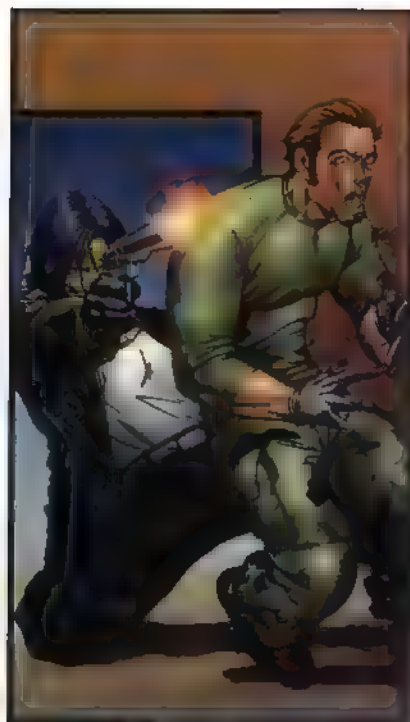
THE TRIAD OF POWER Natural enemies, the Darkness, Witchblade, and the Angelus are the three forces that have shaped the world throughout time.

JACKIE ESTACADO

First Appearance: Witchblade #10

Jackie Estacado is a Mafia hitman and the most recent wielder of the ancient Darkness power. Without scruples or a moral direction other than to protect his family, Jackie must master his new

abilities while learning his true origin. Fans can look for Jackie to tussle with the Russian mob, the FBI, and of course, supernatural villains in the coming months as he finds his place in a violence-filled world. ■ DD



theme of self-discovery that is prevalent throughout the title. Much of Jackie's desire to learn about his own origins and history is linked to his need to understand the Darkness power, and how it will ultimately impact his life.

Jackie won't be the only one digging for information on the Darkness and his past. "Living in New York, you see that Mafia Dons are filmed constantly," says Lobdell, "so the fact that nobody in the FBI is aware that Jackie [has] the Darkness stretches the realm of believability, even in a world where we're not necessarily supposed to believe everything. And if the Darkness existed in the real world, the FBI wouldn't just settle for Scully and Mulder holding flashlights to take him down."

Where the FBI is concerned, Jackie will also have to prepare for battles of a different nature. *legal battles*. Look for a mysterious woman to enter Jackie's life in this summer's blockbuster issue #25—a woman who has ties not only to the FBI, but also to the man killed by Jackie way back in the opening scene of issue #1.

"She's been preparing for months," says Lobdell, "investigating the Darkness, figuring out who he is, building a case against him, and learning how to stop him, perhaps legally rather than physically." As Wahl elaborates, "The story will bring the book full circle, explaining the identity of the guy he killed in #1. We'll see that he plays an important role posthumously." Additionally, a three-issue story will find Jackie up against the Russian mob. "They're not quite as organized as Jackie is, but they certainly

BATTLE PLANS "An unrepentant hitman who kills without compunction," Jackie may meet his match in a mysterious woman who will battle him...in the courts.

have their dark, twisted conspiracies and secrets," suggests Lobdell.

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Lobdell and Wahl also have plans for a number of other Darkness-related projects. "Scott is really interested in working on a *Darkness 2000* issue that will take place in the future, as well as *Darkness Infinity*, which will deal with the idea of someone else other than Jackie inheriting the Darkness," says Wahl. Lobdell also has a number of other ideas brewing, including some possible crossovers with the fan-favorite *Witchblade*.

"One idea is for a time-traveling story," he says, "in which Jackie goes up against Kenneth Irons and manages to steal the *Witchblade*, so that he'd prevent Sara Pezzini from ever getting it." Because of the link between the two powers, as opposing members of the Triad of Power, expect there to be some type of relationship between Jackie and Sara. "There will be some continuity between the two books. In fact, I proposed a story in which they switched powers," says Lobdell, "but it was shot down."

New ideas and a new writer... One last change on the book will complete the circle—a new penciler. Benitez plans to take his leave following issue #25, a book he will share with new regular penciler Clarence Lansang, a rising star who has worked on fill-in issues for several Top Cow books, including *Witchblade*, *The Darkness* and the defunct *Weapon Zero*. "I'll be penciling issues #21 and 22," states Lansang. "Hopefully, I'll finally be able to truly define my style on *The Darkness*, and we can really start to burn the issues out."

As seems to be the case with everyone at Top Cow nowadays, "In Scott We Trust" seems to be his rallying cry. "I'm confident that he will produce something that's amazing. I can't think of another book I'd rather work on," says Lansang. "With Lobdell, anything is possible."

And thanks to Top Cow's promotion of Lobdell as a top creator in their house ads for *The Darkness*, he truly feels like a part of the family, though it remains to be seen what other projects he will have a hand in. "I'm theirs for life," he jokes, just like Jackie Estacado.

ToyFare copy editor Dan DiGiacomo cried and whined for his own *Darkling*, but settled for a *Furby* instead.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

TALES OF THE DARKNESS REVEALS THE STORIES BEHIND JACKIE ESTACADO'S FOREFATHERS



The American Revolution. Each was a historic turning point for mankind, and the Darkness was there for every one.

The quarterly *Tales of the Darkness* explores the lives of the countless other Estacado men that have wielded the Darkness power, whether from the distant past or the distant future. Thus far, the book has depicted some creative stories for each time period. The plan is to continue in that vein.

David Finch and David Quinn (of *Ascension*) will be working on the upcoming issue, "Rampage." Editor David Wahl: "Quinn is really into mythology, so his stories will be more past-oriented. This is a trend that will continue within the book, as Wahl plans to concentrate on the Darkness' role in shaping human history.

"We plan to go back into real history, explaining actual events with the Darkness involved," Wahl continues. "Perhaps the Darkness is a part of the mythology for what's happened in history."

One other book forward to it. *Tales of the Darkness* will continue to present Darkness stories as well as a crossover with *Tales of the Witchblade*. "We have a few exciting plans for the future that will lead into a crossover with *Witchblade*. The series will definitely have a well-woven fabric that enriches the Darkness mythos," says Wahl. ■ DD

EXTINCTION *AGENDA*

When Mother Earth targets humanity for death, the heroes of *Spirit of the Tao* have just one problem: deciding which side to take

Earth's had enough. After creating holes in the ozone layer, devastating rain forests, and causing countless oil spills, humanity's messed with Mother Nature one too many times. And She's finally striking back.

In *Spirit of the Tao*, one of Top Cow's younger titles, Earth's ancient defensive system, the Tao (pronounced "Dow," rhymes with "cow"), has targeted humanity for extinction. Its survival depends on the Tao dragon, a fierce creature that destroys any species threatening the Earth. A natural, physical manifestation of the Tao, the Tao dragon's power currently resides in the hands of two inexperienced eighteen-year-olds, series stars Lance and Jasmine.

But humanity's not taking the possibility of its extinction lying down. Fortunately, it's got defenders of its own: ancient clans, scheming aliens and an obsessive millionaire. But that's where the shared goal—wanting the Tao destroyed—ends. Earth's would-be saviors all have their own agenda, and the line between hero and villain is very thin. And that ambiguity is just how writer D-Tron likes it.

"Evil in this book is subjective, just as it is in life," says D-Tron. "I don't consider anyone evil. Some [of the characters] are overzealous, obsessive, maybe even crazy, but not evil. Many times we judge other people—whether they're right or wrong, moral or immoral—based on our own personal beliefs. But there's no absolute answer. Is killing humans evil? Yes, from [our] perspective. But from Mother Earth's perspective, it's only a matter of survival."

TOP TAO

As the series unfolds, everything revolves around Lance and Jasmine. Raised together from birth, the duo, as the incarnation of the Tao, share a strong psychic connection and possess violent powers (see "Character Profile" sidebar, page 76) that are emerging faster than they can learn to control them.

"They're just trying to cope with their new roles in life and stay together," says D-Tron. "Unfortunately, due to Lance and Jasmine's opposing views, their relationship won't last unless one breaks or they reach a compromise. Although she's half human, Jasmine will take on the role of the Tao as a killer of all creatures that threaten Mother Earth's existence. Lance also feels the influence of the Tao, but chooses to deliver mankind from destruction [instead]."

One relationship that seems to be working out just fine is the creative team behind *Spirit of the Tao*, which *Witchblade* inker D-Tron co-created with brother Hoai Truong and series penciler Billy Tan last year. Planned as a 22-issue mini-series, the trio based their story, and Lance and Jasmine's

developing opposition, on the classic Eastern philosophy of Taoism, which teaches that nature is a delicate, shifting balance.

A key image seen throughout the series is Taoism's circular symbol, the yin and yang. Its black and white halves embody the eternal struggle of opposites, such as good and evil, or in this case, the subdued, compassionate Lance and the sexy, hot-tempered Jasmine. The Tao in *Spirit of the Tao* is trying to return balance to an unbalanced world, but where does killing humans come into the equation?

"The Tao views humans as a virus that constantly brings harm to its body," says Tan. "The Tao is just protecting itself from the annoying pest living [off of] it that is disturbing the development of other species."

BALANCING THE SCALES

So, other than the conflicted Lance, who else is there to protect us "germs"? First, there're the Tao Hunters, a trio of immortal aliens whose name suggests they're here to defeat the Tao and save humanity, right? Yes...and no. While the Tao Hunters do want to destroy the Tao, their reasons are less than noble: They want to make the Earth vulnerable for other, more sinister plans.

"The Tao Hunters have existed since the beginning of time, but their purpose wasn't for the benefit of humanity," says D-Tron. "It runs deeper than that."

Of course, the Tao Hunters' devious plot is hidden from their human allies, the Jaikap Clan, who fought with the Hunters against the Tao for centuries until they finally trapped the dragon's essence in a cylinder called the Sceptre of the Tao during an ancient battle. Ever since then, the Clan has guarded



ENTER THE DRAGON Mother Nature's defensive system has manifested itself in the form of two humans. Jasmine and Lance (left), who can physically merge and transform into the deadly Tao dragon (above).

CHARACTER PROFILE

LANCE and JASMINE

TAKING SHAPE Lance and Jasmine transform into a full-grown, flying, fire-breathing dragon (*Spirit of the Tao* #6) and generate sharp appendages that are strong enough to deflect bullets (#1).

GOING MENTAL Better than watching cell phones, a strong telepathic link keeps Lance and Jasmine in touch, while prophetic dreams keep them forewarned.

TOUGH ENOUGH Endowed with superhuman strength, Jasmine and Lance once played a spontaneous game of "catch" with a crowded cable car (#4).

HANDS-ON Trained by Master Lang, Lance and Jasmine are fierce fighters. Just check the floor afterward and you'll see it littered with bodies.

Slowly learning to control Earth's elements, Lance and Jasmine have already learned to survive without air or protection from the cold when they swim to Alcatraz Island (#1).

LANCE

First Appearance: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

Patient, levelheaded and compassionate, Lance is a member of the Jaikap Clan, which raised him to defend humanity against the Tao. However, Lance is also one of the current incarnations of the Tao itself, which Tan and D-Tron say will increasingly place him in conflict with himself and his dual role as humanity's savior and destroyer in upcoming issues.

JASMINE

First Appearance: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

Also created by the Tao and raised by the Jaikap Clan, Jasmine is Lance's exact opposite. More influenced by the Tao than Lance, Jasmine is hot-tempered, headstrong, impulsive and willing to kill on its behalf, which Tan and D-Tron tease will have increasing ramifications for her relationship with Lance as the series progresses. ■ AP

the Sceptre while seeking a cure for those of its members who have become hideously mutated by exposure to dragon remains called dragon ash.

But 19 years ago, the Sceptre was stolen by humanity's third defender, Joseph Chamberlain, the Head of Project Dynamics (or HPD to his pals). HPD wants to prevent the apocalypse he believes the Tao will cause so he hoped then to destroy the Sceptre before the dragon awoke. But fearing HPD actually planned to release the dragon, not destroy it, the Jaikaps' Grandmaster sent three of his pupils—Jaikap Masters Menicus, Aimy and Lang—to interfere with HPD's plans. The fight ended with Chamberlain's son and Master Aimy both dead, their blood causing the dragon to be reborn as its latest incarnation: the two human babies, Lance and Jasmine.

Escaping with the infants, Lang raised them amongst the Tao-hunting Jaikaps, teaching them to treasure their human side and shun the dragon within. "Lang's at [odds with] everything he holds dear," says D-Tron, "knowing that [his wife] Aimy wanted the Tao to die, but the children are the only things he has left of her."

With so many enemies, who do the dragon spawns (particularly Jasmine, who's beginning to embrace the Tao) have on their side? The Tao hasn't left them without any allies. Just as the dragon spawns are a manifestation of the Tao, so too is the immortal Messiah, who's actually the closest ally Lance and Jasmine have. A tutor to new dragon spawns, "Messiah wants Lance and Jasmine to fully realize their Tao heritage," says D-Tron.

That goal, however, runs against the plans of the new leader of the Jaikap Clan, Menicus, who believes that by gaining control of the dragon ash he could possess the Tao's powers, which would enable him to take over the world.

"Menicus is the real villain of the series," says D-Tron. "Menicus murdered the Grandmaster and set out to obtain the dragon ash, which was his intent from the very beginning."

ANCIENT CHINESE SECRETS

But Menicus isn't the only one who wants the dragon ash. D-Tron and Tan hint that, in the coming months, there'll be an all-out quest for the Tao's power.

"Everyone, including the Tao Hunters, Menicus, Messiah, HPD, Jasmine and Lance, will try to get the dragon ash," says D-Tron.

In the meantime, Lance and Jasmine's Tao abilities will continue to develop, turning them into real forces of nature. "As they become more in tune with the Tao and nature, they'll discover secret powers such as controlling the elements," teases D-Tron. "The Earth will react to them [in the form of] volcanoes, tidal waves, hurricanes [and such]."

Not that big-budget special effects will save them from all the complications ahead. Among other things, HPD is about to reveal a terrible secret contained in a letter of prophecy; his granddaughter Jaime (who bears the code name, Mary III) will discover she's related to Jasmine; and each

time the Tao Dragon manifests, it'll be larger, stronger and meaner. All this leaves the dragon spawns not knowing which way to turn, but of course, everyone's willing to offer their distorted suggestions.

"Messiah will try to manipulate Jasmine after he realizes that Lance has taken humanity's side," says D-Tron, who hints that the Jaikaps, in turn, will continue working on Lance.

With the dragon spawns split up and everyone running in circles, the creators tease that it'll be Menicus who finally gains possession of the dragon ash. But will having the power of the Tao mean being able to control it? Don't bet on it. Already unstable, Messiah's attempts to manipulate the Tao to forge an army of mutants and achieve world conquest will only direct more attention against him.

"Realizing the destruction of life, Jasmine and Lance will join forces with an unlikely ally to stop Menicus," says D-Tron.

But the new ally's identity, and the final fate of humanity for that matter, won't remain a mystery forever. D-Tron promises many more answers—and surprises—by the end of the current series, which he hints could lead into a second series, minus Lance and Jasmine.

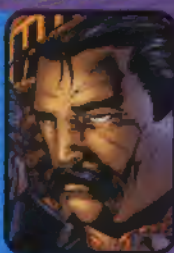
"In the end, someone must sacrifice their life to save the world," teases D-Tron, "so don't count on having Lance and Jasmine back as the main characters. They might not be around."

While Seattle-based freelancer Anthony Peacock thinks the Tao dragon's pretty cool, he'll always have a soft spot for Puff the Magic Dragon.

DRAGON PLAYERS

SPIRIT OF THE TAO'S MOVERS AND SHAKERS AT A GLANCE

IN *SPIRIT OF THE TAO*, EVERYBODY'S GOT THEIR OWN AGENDA AND A DIFFERENT VERSION OF THE TRUTH. AND BY THE TIME THE MINI-SERIES ENDS, NO ONE WILL BE IN THE SAME ROLE THEY STARTED IN. TO HELP SORT OUT THE PLAYERS, CREATORS D-TRON AND BILLY TAN GIVE THE SKINNY ON...



MASTER LANG

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO IS THIS? Lance and Jasmine's adopted father, he's a Jaikap warrior who raised them as humans hoping to keep their violent Tao spirits in check.

WATCH FOR: "He'll undergo dramatic changes," says Tan. "He'll be held against his will and transformed into something he disbelieves in."



MENICUS

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO IS THIS? The new Jaikap leader, Menicus manipulates people in order to gain possession of the dragon ash.

WATCH FOR: "Menicus believes that by ingesting the dragon ash he'll gain the power of the Tao," says D-Tron. "He could control the mutated Jaikaps and conquer the world."



MESSIAH

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #5

WHO IS THIS? Part of the Tao, Messiah is an immortal who tutors new generations of dragon spawns.

WATCH FOR: "Messiah will try to manipulate Jasmine after he realizes that Lance has taken humanity's side," says D-Tron, "and he'll also try to prevent the Tao Hunters and the Jaikaps from curing the mutated Jaikap members."



THE TAO HUNTERS

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO ARE THEY? Allied to the Jaikaps, this immortal trio of aliens wants to destroy the Earth's immune system for their own secret, devious reasons.

WATCH FOR: "So far, the Tao Hunters have the upper hand," says Tan, "but things might turn around once Lance and Jasmine get a hold of the dragon ash."

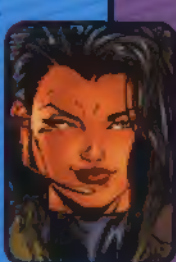


JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN (HPD)

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #2

WHO IS THIS? Plagued by prophetic dreams, Chamberlain believes he's meant to save the world from the Tao.

WATCH FOR: "He'll seek revenge for the death of his son," says Tan. "He'll constantly track the Tao signatures of Lance and Jasmine and hunt them down."



"MARY"

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #2

WHO IS THIS? An ice-cold mercenary, "Mary" is really HPD's granddaughter, Jaime, and his second-in-command.

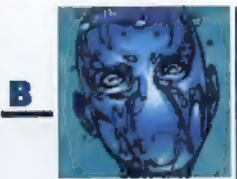
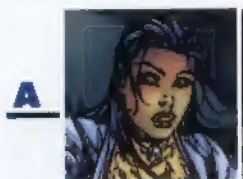
WATCH FOR: "We'll be revealing Mary's background, showing her emotional side, and revealing her relationships to Chamberlain and Jasmine," says D-Tron. "She'll have more of an active role in future issues." ■ AP

FATHOM THIS

T.C.I.Q.
TOP COW INTELLIGENCE QUOTIENT

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES JACK A DULL BOY, SO WE DECIDED TO WHIP UP SOME FUN STUFF TO HELP BRIGHTEN YOUR DAY. TAKE A BREAK FROM THE DAILY GRIND, RELAX AND ENJOY THIS BRIEF RESPITE—AND LET THAT GUY JACK DO ALL THE WORK.

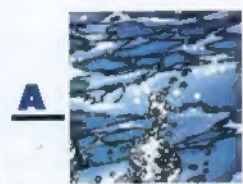
1 There were three versions of *Fathom* #1, each showing the action from a different point of view. Which character's P.O.V. didn't get a version?



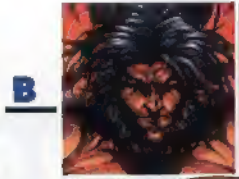
2 Which of the following crafts haven't shown up in *Fathom* yet?



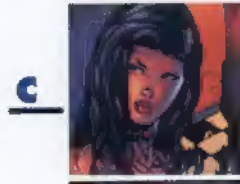
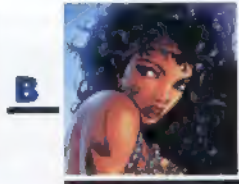
3 Which of the following substances can Aspen turn into?



4 Who hasn't appeared in a comic with a Top Cow character?



5 Who of the following is not a past wielder of the Witchblade?



6 Who is Aspen's ex-boyfriend?

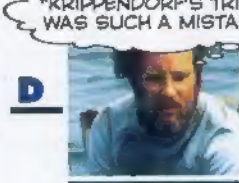
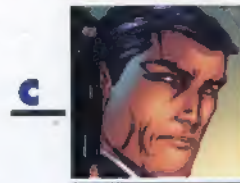
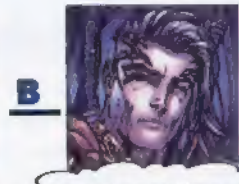


PHOTO BY PAUL SCHWAB

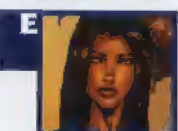
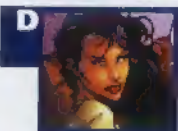
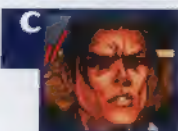
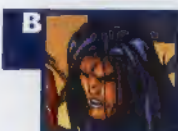
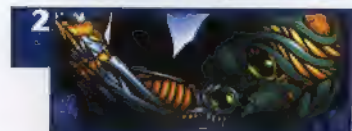
ASPEN ASKEW

Calling all Michael Turner wannabes! Here's your chance to draw like the master...well, sort of. Below left is a Turner-drawn sketch of Aspen, but we've diced it up and mixed it all around. Your job is to copy the boxes into their corresponding slots in the grid on the right, making Aspen whole again! After that, you can tell your friends "I drew like Mikel!"

1	2	3			
A				C1	B3 A2
B				B2	A1 C2
C				B1	C3 A3

WHOSE TECH IS IT ANYWAY?

The Top Cow universe is, in a few words, "tech" heavy. Going by just the images you see below, match the tech to its respective wielder. Don't be fooled, though! Techs like the Witchblade have had more than one host. (But you knew that already, right?)



BATTLE OF THE DEEP

TOP COW'S FATHOM TAKES ON DISNEY'S "LITTLE MERMAID"

For years, that spunky redheaded Ariel from Disney's "The Little Mermaid" ruled the waves. With a sassy smile and a voice that could melt even Mike Tyson's heart, Ariel floated to the top of the heap. But then along came a company named Top Cow and a book named *Fathom*. Now with a superhot artist like Michael Turner behind the babelicious water-wielding Aspen Matthews this marine biologist is on fire. But does she have the gills to go toe to fin with Ariel? Wizard put 'em to the test!



ARIEL vs. ASPEN

DAD

King Triton, king of the seas

EDGE: Ariel

Unknown, adopted by naval officer

PERSONALITY

Whines, thinks broken forks are neat

Sultry and mysterious with an athlete's determination

EDGE: Aspen

APPEAL

Young and married at 16

Hot and single

EDGE: Aspen

(Assuming you're not in Alabama)

VILLAINS

A buxom, power-hungry octopus named Ursula

A tall, mysterious, underwater-breathing, take-no-crap guy named Killian

EDGE: Aspen

LANGUAGE

Talks to the fishies, sea horsies and a Jamaican crab

EDGE: Ariel

Speaks English

FOREIGN RELATIONS

A goofy French chef is made to look ridiculous

Americans and Japanese are virtually at war

EDGE: Aspen (Good depiction of the French, though)

AND THE WINNER IS...

Watch out Disney! You're cutesy little mermaid's got nothing on this mysterious athletic babe. Aspen takes it, 4 to 2.



Aspen Askew

Whose Tech Is It Anyway?

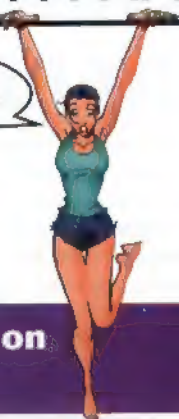
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TCIO

ANSWERS (DON'T BE A SKEWER!)

AQUA FACTS

QUICK!
SOMEBODY DRAW A
FLOOR!



Strange truths about the most alien environment on earth: the sea

Fathom creator, artist and co-writer Michael Turner didn't just wake up one morning and decide to create an underwater comic book. A longtime enthusiast of the ocean and its mysteries, Turner has been swimming, water skiing, surfing and scuba diving for years.

Turner's also spent countless hours researching that wet stuff that covers most of our planet, giving *Fathom* a more realistic look and feel than other books set in the deep, blue yonder. Few have his background, so the next time you gather your friends to read the latest issue, feel free to impress them with the following facts. Only don't tell them where you got your education....

BIOLOGY

2 FEET: Amount that kelp grows each day when the March plankton bloom fills the California waters with nutrients. No plant grows faster.

60 MILES PER HOUR:

Fastest speed attained by a mako shark. The mako is believed to be the fastest-moving creature in the oceans.

100 SHARKS: Number of fully formed young sharks to which a blue shark will give birth at once. The blue shark is perhaps the planet's most prevalent predator.

TWO GREEN TURTLES: Number of turtles that will reach adulthood out of the 1,000 eggs a single female lays each season.

2 WEEKS: Time it takes a cleaner wrasse to change physically from a female into a male. When the male in a wrasse school dies, the oldest female begins demonstrating masculine, territorial, aggressive behavior within hours.



990 POUNDS: Weight of the barnacles that will attach themselves to a single humpback whale in northern waters. When humpbacks swim south to breed, warmer temperatures cause the barnacles to die and fall off—only to be replaced by whale lice.

170 YEARS: Life span of

the orange roughy. This deep-sea species, which lives in the waters off New Zealand, was recently endangered by overfishing during the 1980s.



OCEANOGRAPHY

40 POUNDS: Amount of gold contained in one cubic mile of seawater.

35,588 FEET: Depth of the Mariana Trench. This chasm is the deepest place in the ocean, bottoming out 6.7 miles beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean.

1,400 MILES: Length of the Great Barrier Reef, a collection of 2,500 individual reefs off the coast of Australia.

10,000 YEARS: Time the current Great Barrier Reef has been growing. Today's reef tops the remains of older coral killed during the Ice Ages.

750 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT: Water temperature of one of the hottest seafloor chimney vents, where molten rocks superheat the water. Found up to 3.5 miles deep, the immense pressure prevents water from changing into steam.

700 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT: Highest temperature an underwater microbe can survive. Some creatures near chimney vents thrive at 235 degrees. Most land microbes die before the boiling point, which is 212 degrees.

HUMAN HISTORY

\$3 MILLION: Damages paid out, in 1912 dollars, by Lloyd's of London, which insured the *Titanic*.

\$10 MILLION: Total cost to build and outfit the *Titanic* in 1912.

\$20 MILLION: Amount of money the company RMS *Titanic* had spent through mid-1996 visiting and recovering pieces of the *Titanic*.

ZERO: Number of iceberg collisions in areas covered by the International Ice Patrol since it was founded after the *Titanic* disaster.

100 MILLION TONS: Weight of seafood caught each year. The amount has remained steady recently after rising for years. Experts believe the growing human population will reduce the catch per person to half its current level in 30 years.

4 MILES: Depth attained by the *Shinkai 6500*. This \$60 million Japanese submersible can take three humans deeper than any other manned vessel.



Matthew E. Milliken tried researching this article by standing in a fathom (6 feet of water), but he got all wet and couldn't breathe because he's only 5 feet, 10 inches tall.